

人類は衰退しました

8

田中 口三才

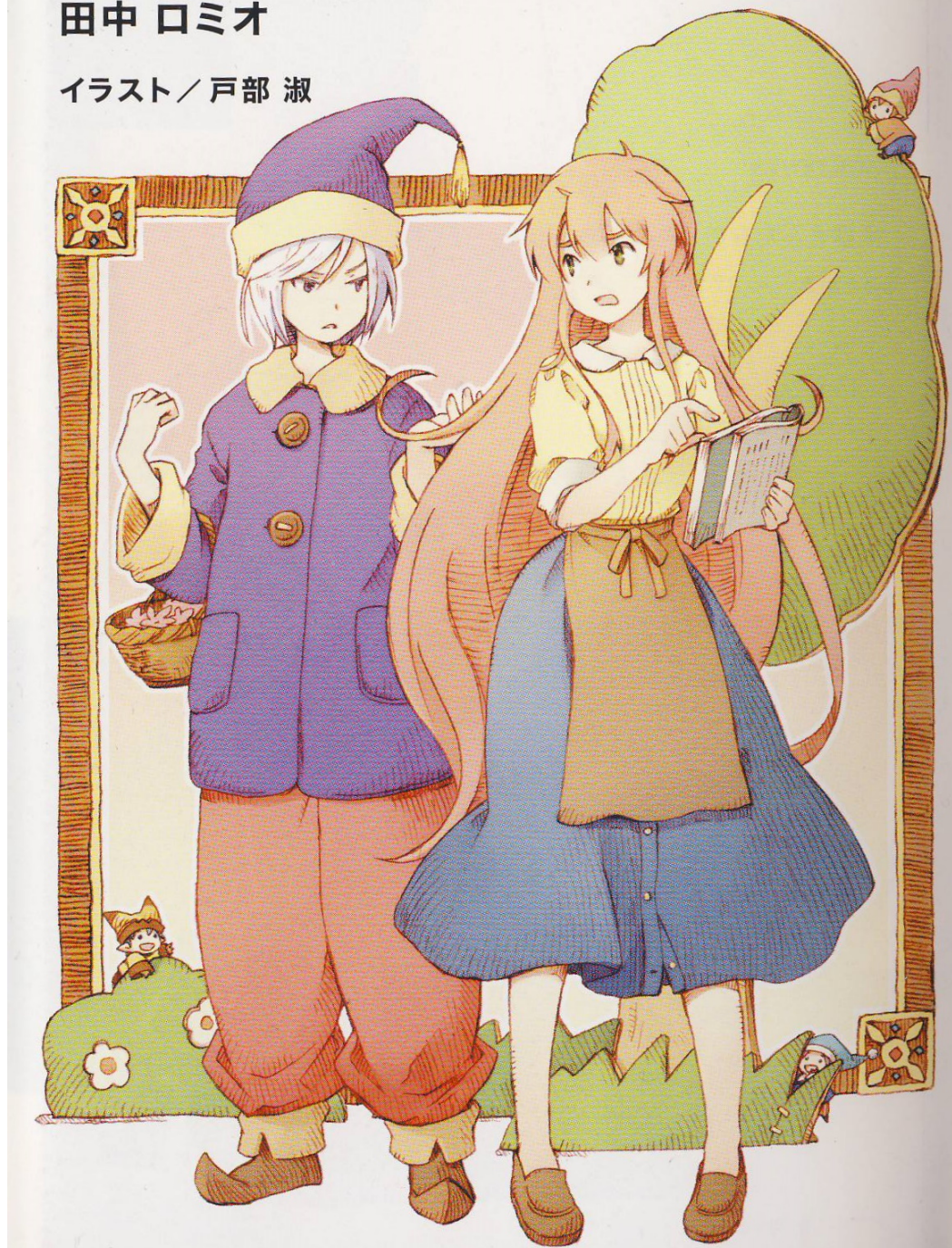
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人類は衰退しました 8

田中 ロミオ

イラスト／戸部 淑



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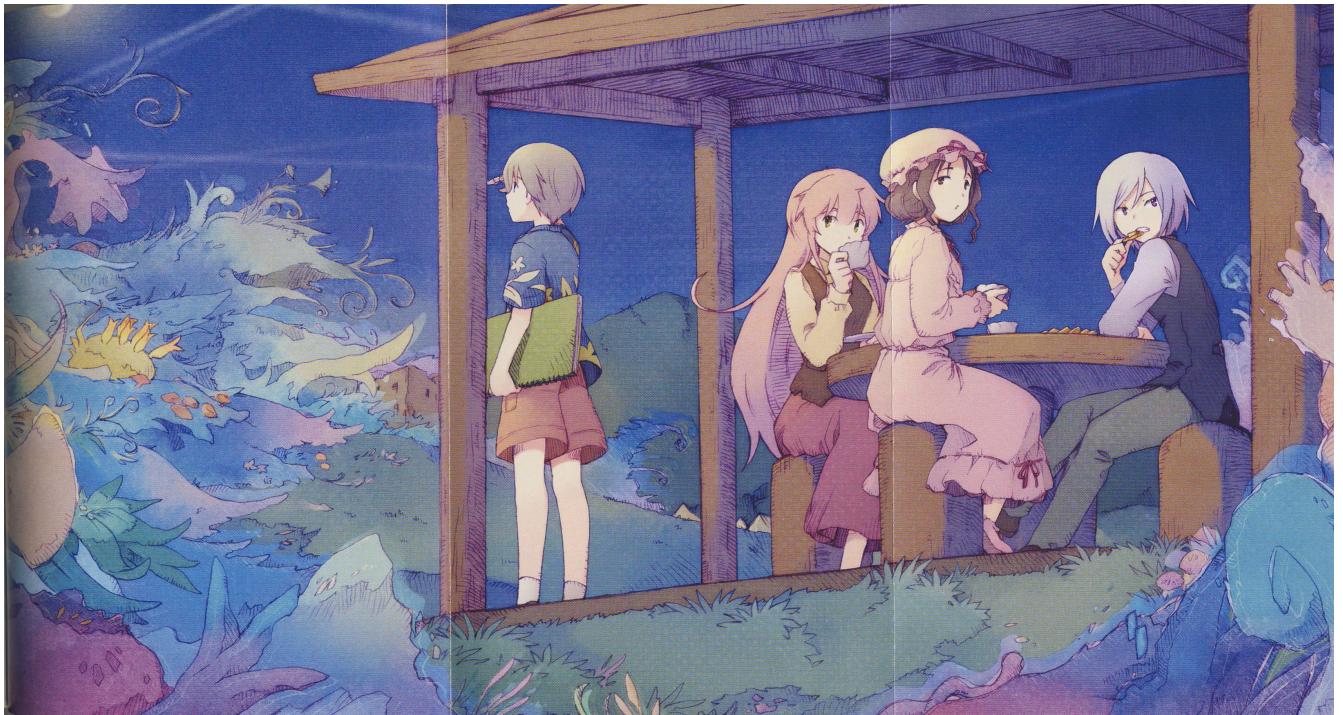
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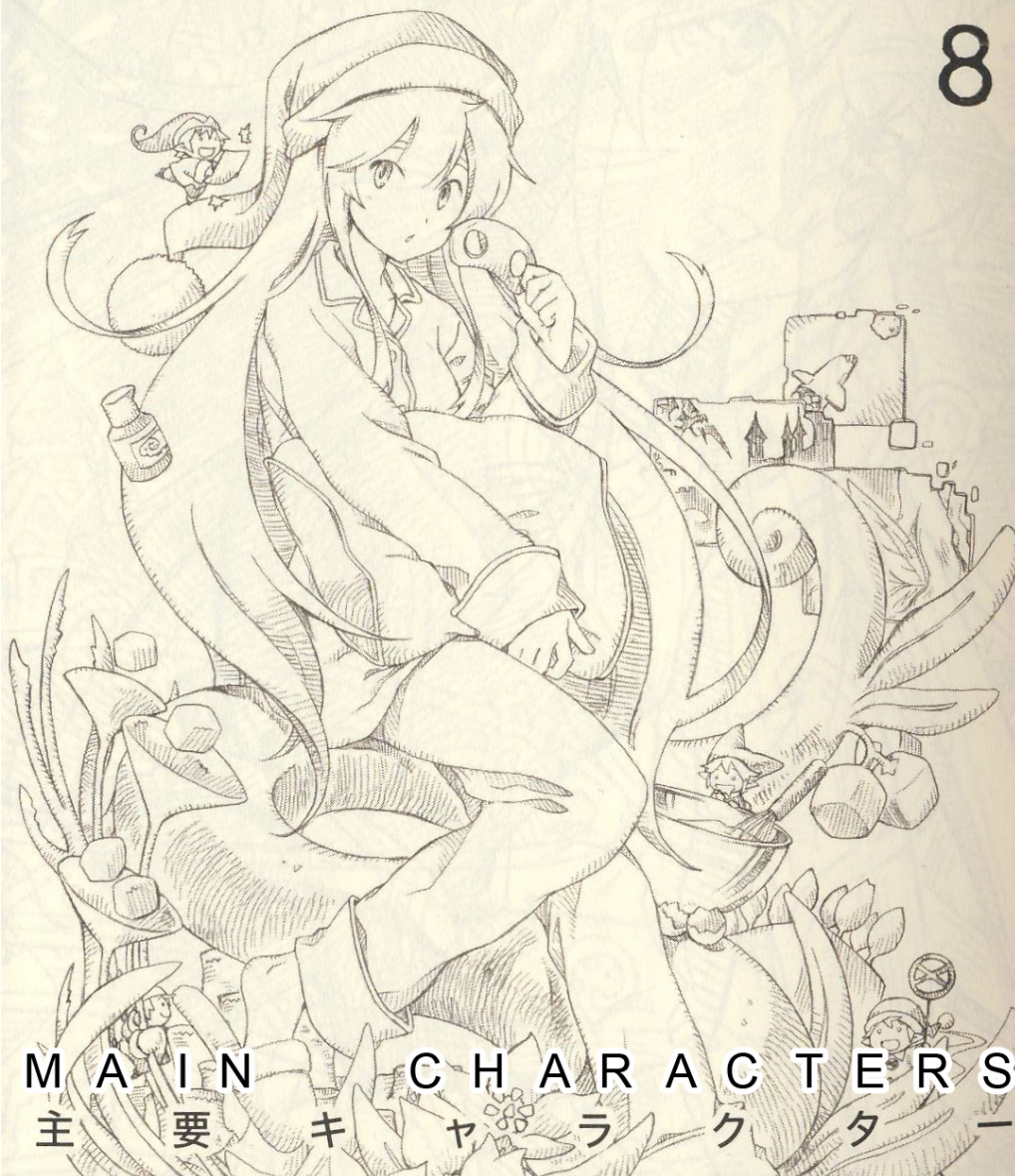
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人類は衰退しました

8



MAIN CHARACTERS 主要キャラクター

Protagonist (Watashi, "I") Narrator of the story. Mediator of Kusunoki Village. Fairies at present, the people who count as humanity on this Earth. **Grandfather** Protagonist's grandfather. Boss of the Office of Mediation in Kusunoki Village.

Assistant-san a youth who works as assistant to the Office of Mediation in Kusunoki Village, **Y** a girl the same age as Protagonist. Works for the UN. **A** Age 8. A mischievous child. **B** Age 8. A quiet boy. **C** Age 8. An agreeable girl. **K** an UN agent dressed in black clothes. **PocMon** a walking memory device equipped with an AI.

From the back cover:

Humanity Has Declined 8

Humanity has met with a gradual decline, and for some centuries now. Earth was now the property of the Fairies. Acting as intermediary between said fairies and humans were the international public servants known as Mediators, which was my job. As Kusunoki Village had been destroyed, its population reduced dramatically. And in all that, Grandfather had been invited by a dilettante aristocrat on a voyage. Destination – the moon. Just in case I handed him a lone Rounded-Up fairy, but the problem is that I was so worried I became sleep-deprived. And then I had a mysterious dream... the effects of the anime, or a punishment for it? The popular can blow up and all that!



Among all the fairies, Puck was the one who had the most talent with the spirits of the dead. That skill was recognized even by the Fairy King Oberon, and since the signs were seen as soon as he was born, he received the best education, and in a mere ten days that talent blossomed. Puck, like all fairies, had sort of a mischievous side to him, but ever since he had mastered this bizarre skill said to be able to trick even the gods, he had displayed a natural talent for nasty mischief that would make even humans lift their eyebrows in shock. However, that was a virtue in the world of the fairies.

Fairy King Oberon liked him very much, he kept him often close and entrusted him with much. Naturally Oberon, being also a fairy, did not want from his confidant Puck the same superficial condescension (commonly also called 'loyalty') he had for humans. He had seen too many pranks, he had had it with them. There was no counting how many humans Oberon alone had put under a spell on a mere whim, enjoying the panic that that caused in them. But this time, even Oberon felt that he, as the ruler, could not speak ambiguously of what Puck had perpetrated.

Puck had made a mistake with the love filter fashioned from the magical Love-in-Idleness Pansy, and the problems of the humans that had incurred his favor had not been solved in the way he wished.

The king's solemn words were cast from his stump-throne and stood up straight on the top of Puck's head. Had he been a normal fairy he would have promptly reduced his size, likely, but those were words brimming with anger and solemnity.

"Come on! I had told ya ta smear that there potion on the guy wearing them red clothes!"

Kusunoki Village, the Village of the Camphor Tree, had been destroyed.

Humanity had declined, was sort of what one would say, yet behind those trite words without any feeling of reality to them laid serious damages.

The cause was that brouhaha about the Monument from last time. Unbelievable that something like that would happen, who would ever have imagined it, truly? Regardless, the village had been thoroughly wrecked from one corner to another, and at present Kusunoki Village was, locally speaking, in danger of re-decline.

Although there were no dead the damage was serious, and there was no recovery in sight yet.

Major facilities had been wrecked or set on fire, damages big and small were reported from every part of the area, and the Village itself lost its main functions.

There were even discussions among the people, saying that, since the village had been destroyed to this extent, then they might as well move away. This shift in opinions, and how first response was late, may have been a cause of the slowness that came next.

Do we rebuild these broken houses? Well, what do we do? If we move away, rebuilding would become pointless, though.

We had, you see.

We had so much that no one cared to repair their own houses.

What we should have thought was that, since our lives in refugee shelters was going to last, we should at least make repairs, even if they turned out to be more or less pointless.

At least we would have, if life in refugee shelters had been uncomfortable.

...it was in nooo way uncomfortable.

We needed to do nothing as support goods were carried in in large quantities from nearby villages and the UN. It was a mountain of support. Because of that, we did not need to rush anything, for we were in no need for clothes or food. That was a bad thing.

The time to say thanks for all the support had come.

Thank you for all your material support, everyone!

We put all our feelings into it, and: *please enjoy this drama as gratitude for supporting Kusunoki!* ...and we were now already at the seventh performance of that screw-loose presentation.

Volunteers were performing that on a hastily improvised open-air stage precisely at this instant.

And the quality of that, which I am sure concerns you?

"...awww-aw, Oberon-sama's wings came off."

Standing in the stage's wings Y, dressed like a human-sized fairy, said that looking bored.

The scene being played on the stage right then was the one in which underling Puck got scolded by the Fairy King.

Backed by a scene of the magical woods, a marital quarrel had broken out between Fairy King Oberon and his wife Titania, a big bustle that involved a dozen people. This story was mainly inspired by Shakespeare's *A Midnight Summer's Dream*.

"...they're just phoning it in. Viewers aren't interested at all."

"Well, it is the seventh performance."

"Nah, it ain't that. It's simply because the quality isn't there. Were it actually fun, no matter how many times you performed this, you'd have the house packed."

Her role was that of the fairy who scattered petals ahead of where the king walked.

She had few lines as well as few scenes. Not being of the land she was a guest star from the UN Staff, and thus could speak bluntly from the audience's viewpoint.

"Clothes are whatever they could find, the artwork is shabby, production is neither original nor flashy. There's no way people would find this adequate, is what I'm sayin'."

...that was understandable even without saying it.

Given the response from the viewers' seats, it was evident that there were few people enjoying this.

The fairies' performance, which was a quiet real-time replica behind the scenes, was much more interesting.

"Titania's angry!" "It's just love potion, smear it every which where!" "Me, I thought I had a lover, but it turned out I didn't!" "Does it have to be an arranged marriage?" "You can, but then you get the death penalty?" "We worship you!" "Oberon-rooon!"



Oooh, how charming.

Also, it was of a marvelous quality.

Beautiful clothes, detailed backgrounds, a dazzling production: flowers literally bloomed and the woods swayed in the wind, it was an entrancing production.

Being just some of the things fairies could do, these were to be expected.

Seriously, if they could do all this, how come they decided to intentionally imitate a low-quality human play?

"We did our best with the script. However, we only did our best as far as giving the script a shape, not what was within it."

"Singing our own praises, are we."

The script had been mine.

The work of coming up with a script from Shakespeare's original text required much, much more imagination and style and contrivances than I thought it would have. With that too-much before me, it was inevitable that all sorts of interesting things would be crossed away.

Did I get a reward measured to my efforts?

I once again glanced at the crowd from behind the stage's wings, and...

"Yaaawn."

I suddenly spotted a person yawning.

It was nobody else but a young girl who felt out of place.

That was despite how the local girls had only come to see the play the first time.

She was wearing a comfortable one-piece dress open at the bottom, which was not really popular these days. She was not fat, but seeing that just her belly was swollen, I could say that she was pregnant, correct?

I had a gut feeling, one that was quite plausible, that, unable to do farm work, requiring as she did absolute repose, she came to see even knowing it was boring.

My motivation went down and down.

"Awright, time for us to go today, too, huh!," went Y.

"Do your best out there~. You can do some ad-lib if people like it~."

"Out of the question!"

"Ah..."

As she was facing the stage, I discovered a frayed spot on the back of her costume. However, there was no time to mend it at that point. Why had the other people in the staff not discovered something like that earlier?

That was because not only on stage, even the people behind it were not quite motivated.

"Sigh..."

Even those gods that dwelt in the details would run away from this, indeed.

People were spending time and effort on something nobody wanted to do. The work of the Kusunoki Village Charity Play Club was falling into that category.

"Tell me, sensei, are charity plays actually supposed to go like that?"

After the performance, the chief of the group that carried in supplies said that, sounding fed up.

"When I was a brat I too assisted with charity performances, and yeah, it was mostly about making a performance and gathering up the donations, then ensuring that areas with problems would receive them, something like that. Giving something back for the support isn't normally considered charity."

"It is exactly as you say."

I deeply bowed my head in shame.

"With this, it's been seven times that I've seen this play. I understand we should be thankful, but we don't need it every single dang time. And I believe there's a lot of people who think that."

"It is exactly as you say..."

"To be frank, what I'd like to see is less effort put into this play and more into recovery already."

"I have no words except to admit that it is exactly as you say."

However, if that were the case, the audience seats would have no one sitting in them anymore.

Seen from the viewpoint of the Village's people, on top of having lost their house, they might have the double trauma of seeing their kindness rejected, which was another thing to worry about.

"After all, see, a month's already passed but the buildings are still in ruin, and the repairs aren't proceeding one whit. This is about time to ask what the hell you people are doing. Times like these, Mediator-senseis like you should make use of that wisdom you have and carry things along, otherwise nothing's going to happen. After all, you're holding on to tons of that ancient wisdom. The Mediator who was at my village did, 't least. She was so reliable. She was young, but she had the wisdom of a much older person. She certainly wasn't investing all her time in the kind of troubles that involved fairies. You too, you're part of the intelligentsia, so come on, you got to expand your job description and be of use to everyone, you can't just go on like this."

"It is exaaaactly as you say..."

The brunt of the attack was on me!

...it looked like the majority of the support troupe was also close to their limits.

"Plays are fine. But when the hell are we going to see progress in the Village's repairs? Be nice if we could hear that today, so when we leave we'll know..."

I had no answer to that.

Not even I knew the deadline for that.

It all depended on people's feelings.

Ever since the Village had been laying in ruin from that disaster, its residents had lost the privilege to hold those healthy and civilizing economical activities even at the basic level. Though all survival-level activities in the Village such as social welfare, social security, public sanitation, expansion and more certainly needed to be carried out, in this world and age there was however no real sense whatsoever that such a thorough administration was required. People were tormented by fear, spent sleepless nights, and wailed for their futures. These people, ones that once really loved their militaristic this-and-that and had formed University-style 'circles' such as the Cannon Club (of which Grandfather was one of its most prominent members, but that aside), they were the ones that laid out a massive number of military-use tents from that collection that they held stored who knows where, so there were good prospects for the very pressing need for places to sleep, however, it could not be denied that events like these had been what later created the above-mentioned problem. Living in tents was surprisingly convenient, and coupled with the late Spring and early Summer temperatures, which were easy to live with, complaints were suppressed, or more likely, we maybe thought that a camping life could be a bit of fun, and that became the very first step towards the present depravity.

"By the way, I got work for you."

Grandfather said that as he made short work of breakfast.

"What a coincidence, I have something to ask you about."

"Mh-hm. Then I'll start with this consultation."

I inquired with Grandfather on the status of the Village.

Saying that I was worried about what to do, I asked about how to escape from this lazy and slovenly situation.

Cool-headed he said, "the right time is going to come soon."

How dependable.

This was time for my greatly-experienced Grandfather, who was also the present head of the Office of Mediation, to act. XP amount was important.

But, as it happened, said Grandfather told me something worrisome.

"But, speaking for myself, it happens that I'm going on an investigation trip, that's why I can't help the Village anymore. Sorry."

"So the answer to my consultation is 'somewhen'?"

"Ninety percent of requests for consultation don't actually ask for a solution. Once the thing is spoken out loud to the consultee, the consultant's sense of gloom is lifted a little."

"Come now, please do not make use of underhanded sophistry with your own flesh and blood!"

What this required was the wisdom that came from real experience.

"Well then, I'll answer seriously, but... the Village has already missed its chance for recovery."

"Is that what you think? Then what should we do?"

"We should have done something before things got like this, there's no other hand to play. It's best to leave it alone."

"That is quite irresponsible."

"No, there's just no need for a Mediator to shoulder a burden like that. It's beyond our responsibilities. What'll happen'll happen. That's how it ends in what we call 'history'."

"Hmmm..."

There were many opinions out there.

"Of course, it's not like it's going to last like this. I expect that, eventually, this unfair waste of support goods will be seen as a problem. There will be a return to the possibility of discontinuation of relief aid, a dangerous situation to be in, and that's when the people will, for the first time, act seriously. It'll be easier to do something when that time comes, so it would be better if you made ready for that."

"Ngh... that is a dry idea..."

It sort of repelled me.

The problem here was not making ready before the event, it was dealing with it after it happened.

"If you want to make it big out there, you're going to want your own handprint on the preparations for recovery to be as big as possible."

"I do not care about making it big." What was he talking about in a generation like this?

"Would it not be better to do something before it came to that?"

"You're an adult at this point, and against your parents' expectations you grew up pragmatic, so you should be good enough of a Mediator that you're able to think about that."

"That way of thinking is sort of unfair. Besides, you know I always have the last resort of just unleashing the power of the faeries on this in a single resolute blow?"

"Has that ever resolved things in nice and clean ways?"

"..."

I must concede that I did not have a counter-argument to that.

Do nothing for the moment, however, was a very relaxed piece of advice.

"Sigh... I am completely spent. Grandfather, how far are you going in your investigative trip?"

I asked with a sigh mixed in.

"Hm, to tell the truth..." and then he said his destination. "It's come up that we're going to the moon."

"Ahahah!"

I thought it a joke.

"It's true."

"...have they dug up a rocket or something somewhere?"

"Yup, a shuttle good for a round trip. I was invited to its test flight."

"That is ridiculous."

"No, we're really going to the moon."

I had no words for a brief moment.

"Lots of letters have come in during all the hustle and bustle about the Monument, you know?"

"Ahhh, that junk mail."

What Grandfather and I had received was the exact same letter.

I was utterly busy with other things, so I ignored it.

This was what it contained:

"Woooah! My elevation is too low, isn't it? Shouldn't I try going to a height higher than anyone else's?"

I tossed it into the stove at mach speed.

"It was truly an attractive letter. I just couldn't resist it."

You all have read it...

"That letter, well, truth is that I found that anyone famous and with at least a Bachelor's Degree got something identical."

"What? But was that letter not hand-written?"

"It was. Hand-written and then replicated, he made this big."

"This is a man so amazing that he sounds like a fool, I see."

A mimeograph could still be put together no matter how great the loss of machine parts was, indeed.

"Right, he thought that handwriting would be more of a proof of good faith. He sent three hundreds all over the world, and less than ten percent answered."

"But that is still nearly thirty people answering, is it. Astounding."

"You graduated school because you had intellectual curiosity, after all."

"People like that are weirdos, or maybe they are not putting enough effort in developing their common sense..."

"Ten percent of people are weirdos. That's what you're saying. I completely agree with you."

Then we must rejoice at how I was a sane and normal person.

According to Grandfather's specialist explanation, the gist of that junk piece of mail was as follows.

The sender was a former aristocrat. He was a wealthy person, which was what it was, given our world, and more, he was a serious science aficionado. In short, he really loved the

technologies of the past.

Dedicated to this hobby to the extreme, the man repaired floating structures that could be deployed on the high seas.

Having never seen the actual thing I could not tell, but the thing was sort of made by massive rafts, which were able to link with each other on the sea and create a vast new area.

So what was the point of releasing that structure out to the sea?

Well, once restored to the point it could be actually utilized, it was proven that it was actually a catapult facility from which a shuttle could be launched. The dish that bothered me in this buffet was...

"Sigh, Madame the Moon, then?"

"That facility was made to launch things upwards. The shuttle was also stored with it."

"For hundreds of years, or, depending how things go, for thousands of years, of course. I cannot believe anyone would ride that on a whim..."

"Whim is not the way to put this."

"Then what is?"

"The Romance of Men, it's called."

"And there we go with the Romance."

Help, Grandfather did not want to remain in decline.

"I believe I must go to the moon. It wouldn't be right not to."

"Do not do it, it is dangerous."

"It's not just me. Brave men from all over the world will be there, participating to this project."

"No one knows how many fairies live on the Moon, so I do not think you do this."

"Well, I already answered that I'll go."

"Is that not beyond you, physically speaking?"

"It might have been the pinnacle of former humanity, because the shuttle is of the same age. It's a bag of overtechnologies. We'll be protected by amazing sciences."

"Even amazing sciences can rust out."

"I'm so looking forwards to this that I've dreamed about it. I won't give up."

I sighed and sunk face down on my desk. I felt that it was going to be impossible to reason with him.

As if sent from the heavens to break this deadlock, a boy appeared, the light of the sun shining from his shoulders.

Right, Assistant-san!

Once a new-entry to our Office of Mediation, one with great things expected from him, he was at this point fully a member.

He left the impression of being an adult, one that had side-stepped puberty, but I came out on top as far as the number of problems solved among the ones we shared.

In other words, the equation solved to *someone on my side*.

And that very Assistant-san said this:

I am coming to the moon as well.

...he was inimical to me.

Sigh, him and her and everybody were always allied with themselves...

Grandfather shook his head.



"Sorry, but it's the sponsor's wishes. Seems this project can only move ahead with the people he's invited."

Assistant-san was disappointed.

"I wish the best to your cooperation in the rebuilding of the Village. You two will cooperate, right?"

"WhaaAAaat?"

"You too, yeah. Your knowledge, why, that alone would make you a dead weight, but once you've chewed through it with wisdom is when you start being useful to others, right? That's why Mediators are always on duty for advice. If they can't do that they can't be said to be proper adults. It's about time you start grabbing some experience points."

"I will be gaining my XP at my pace, so please remain in your role of leader of the work force. Working hard enough that I can take over in about ten years is OK by me."

"Nope, I've already decided."

"HuuUUuuff!"

I went full force in trying to stop this, but it was pointless.

"I'll be going, then. I leave everything to you. Do the best job you can, Substitute Chief."

In the end, Grandfather went out on the voyage in his Hawaiian shirt.

As the person put in charge of everything I was just left with my jaw hanging open.

Even though, as a charm, I handed him a Fairy Ball (a Rounded-Up and well asleep fairy targeting long-term preservation).



There existed no better amulet on this world.

As long as there was at least one fairy, the worst ought not happen.

But those left behind had a great many problems.

The former building was at present dangerous and no longer usable, so the new Office of Mediation was yet again a tent.

Just when I thought that the Office building had avoided direct damage, it turned out that the tank operated by Grandfather and his friends had opened a big hole in the wall with one of its catapulted strikes.

"It's a building for public use, so it'd be best to have a tent as large as possible."

And what was provided from Grandfather's request was, of all things, a tent building (five floors). And the Office was, again by Grandfather's request, set up in the fifth floor (I had proposed the first).

"...there's some really ridiculous stuff out there," went Y.

"Your legs are shaking."

"I-, it's so up high... in a tent, but up high...!"

That was quite the impressive fear for someone who had the disposition of a bully.

Add also how the framework's cloth had been reinforced, that we had a window, and even a toilet with the plumbing connected, so it was not that inconvenient. That being said, there were of course unsafe things.

I wanted to hurry and get away from here.

"That, this, and everything has our failing to revive things to blame. Come up with an idea now, freeloader."

"Close up shop on the Village and merge with somewhere else."

"That is what an outsider would say!"

"Well, I'm an outsider to begin with, so that's my basic conclusion, I think."

"And I am so stressed because my hometown is gone, I am."

"Even though you don't really look stressed for being reduced to living in tents?"

Not being a born Kusunokian, she had no deep concern for the existence or otherwise of the Village.

"I prefer hard walls. I do not wish to do work in a building surrounded by safety nets, of all things."

"But the building we used was fine. There just happened to be a hole in it."

"That is a building from far back in the past, who knows when it will collapse, that thing."

"I getcha, that thing was decrepit to the core. Maybe they should rebuild it from grounds up.

Wouldn't it be fun if we did?"

"It might be..."

I said that with faraway eyes.

"Come on, tell?"

"I am playing with the idea of proposing to investigate the developmental technologies of the ancient city and using those as reference."

"Ain't that hard work?"

Though, thinking about the mood of the people, their tension, would make this feel low priority (which was exactly why I wanted to push it on someone else).

"Phew. And, done."

The request forms for the materials that were scarce were now assembled, and *ton-ton*, I tapped them on the desk and into a neat pile. Once these were handed over to the caravan, work for this day was finished.

"Happy to hear it. Wanna play some chess?"

Y, who had finished before me, said that.

Though both UN employees, Y was under a different section from mine, so there was a fair bit of difference in the work that was handed down to her from above, and the time that she had to spend dedicated to her job was no more than half mine. The grass was truly greener on the other side.

During that extra free time she kept herself active by pushing through with her plans for the creation of hobby-related things, be it Same-Sex Magazines or electronic games.

Right now, it looked like Y was once again handling the preparations for a new project...

"...as long as it doesn't cost rationing tokens, it's fine."

"Yes, it's fine. Go with that."

She could have gone home, but it would have been to an empty tent.

Of course, while in the present life of refugees there was no discomfort, I also felt like there was nothing to be proud of. Maybe there should be more on the line, like life?

And as I was thinking that thoughtless thing, a guest arrived.

"Excuse me. This is the Office of Mediation, right? Where is the Chief?"

The guest was a middle-aged male. He had lived in the Village since times past, and I had happened to see him many times.

"My Grandfather, the Chief, is not present, so please inquire with me in his stead."

"Oh man, I see. The Chief helped me so many times, I just thought I would give him one final goodbye."

"Final?"

Behind the man I also spotted the wife and daughter. All of them had travel bags.

"Sigh, yeah, actually, we're going to move to a distant village where our relatives live..."

Do-doom!, it went.

Truth was, with this it was the twenty-seventh change of residence. It was also what had been increasing my workload of late.

"Kusunoki Village reeeally looks like in a straight line towards depopulation."

I turned over the worksheets I had compiled so that only the white would show, and with the whites on top I chucked them into the wooden box with 'memo paper' written on it.

"...we have three less residents, I have to redo it all."

Because the statements of insufficient goods were strictly inspected for any surplus (though, do understand, in the past people would wonder where the impropriety was), it was fundamental that any request of support goods be based on an accurate report of the population. If I delivered it like this, it would be rejected.

It had all been things like these, of late.

"The population decreased by three, I also have to fix the number of goods claimed..."

As the VIP Boss strictly observed a no-inaccuracies policy on documents, if these changes of residence continued, this will end with me having to revise the graph.

No, there was something to do before that.

"Just this week, population has decreased by eighty, right..."

Kusunoki Village was a large settlement, but having eighty people leave was a significant event.

Although indirectly, I was involved in this trend, so I could not ignore it.

"...this is bad."

This was bad indeed. I had to do *something*.

I was jealous of how Y had nothing to do.

"I sooo wish I could become an outsider like a certain someone."

"And if you did?"

Her defenses were solid.

It was the impudence that she came equipped with, I supposed.

"So, right, the population of the Village increased just slightly after that affair with the Same-Sex Magazines, did it not?"

"Yup, several dozen people came to reside here."

"How about holding another event, then it might become the cue for revitalization and make

the population increase, would it not?"

"Events are fun because they're held rarely and in a Holy Land, so being a resident is a different thing, isn't it? At the very least, I don't think they'd move into a village that's on the wane."

Quite so.

I supposed there was no other way to revitalize the Village, was there? After I had whispered that, I found Y playing with a chess piece in the space between her fingers as her eyes cast a suspicious shine towards me.

"Not like it can't work."

"It what?"

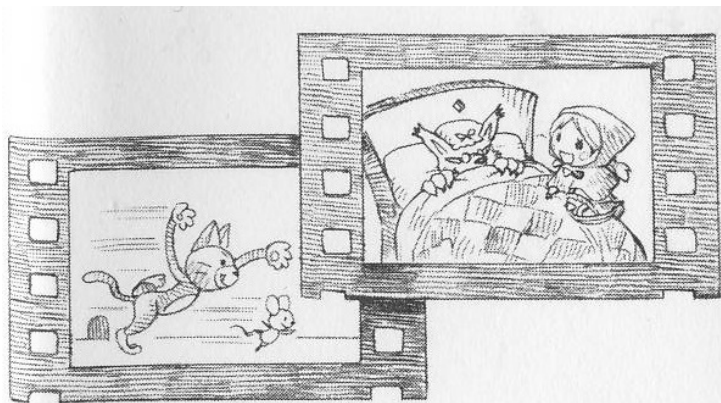
"...animation."

Perhaps because Y said that with the feeling of a hoarse-voiced male, what she said was all too weighty.

"Animation?"

I had watched some.

Like the one from Grimm's Fairy Tales, or the one where a cat chased a mouse, I had watched those at The School's library. But I had the feeling that what Y was talking about had something of a different vector.



"Do you know? Anime... it can be done by hand. Even without high-level machinery, as long as you spend enough time on it, it's doable. I researched history, so I know that."

"Uh-huh," at that moment I was not interested. "In short, what do you mean?"

"If we make an anime, the Village will recover."

"Hah!"

I laughed that away.

Two days passed when I noticed that I was, for some reason, drawing animation cells.

"Why am I doing this?"

Was I subconsciously made to join with that anime-making that I thought I laughed away...?

"Heh heh heh... as long as they have the slightest skill in drawing, I will employ anyone as an Animetist."

That was the phrase that I recalled. That was a phrase that I had heard recently. But when and in what situation were not in my memories. There was no mistake in how it had been Y that had told me those words. W-, was it brainwashing? It seemed that that woman's power to

exploit others was no joke.

Incidentally, an 'animetist' was a neologism of Y's, a combination of anime + artist, I had no idea if she meant anything else by that.

Besides me, a staff of ten people were crammed in this large tent that was the production studio. These girls that Y had scouted were all excellent artists.

Ours were illustration skills exclusively used to be enjoyed and shared between friends. Her present scheme of channeling those in the making of an anime would be attractive to people, indeed.

As for a manual that would allow a beginner to somehow make an anime, Y made one simple to understand.

I thought that she had skills in being an impostor or a con woman.

"...uhm, excuse me, I did draw this, so...?"

I showed the cell that I had drawn to Y.

"Yup, no good."

The director only seldom failed to pass a cell.

"Where?"

"The motion doesn't fit. Look carefully at the key frames, it doesn't fit right in between."

"Please do not ask a complete beginner to make high-quality work."

This was going to be a, well, strange anime given what we were doing our best in making was a flip book.

And still I had to do my best unto death. It was quite difficult.

Although I had doubts about the charity part of all this, working this hard should have a meaning, should it not?

"You're drawing lots of pictures, but you just don't feel like you're matching those the other draw, are you."

Now that I think of it, it had been like that since I was at school, I smiled.

"Well, it is difficult to fit with the key frames. I do not quite understand how the quality of the picture is much less important than the motion fitting."

"Hmmm. Then how about moving to a different job, one that isn't drawing? The Assistant is doing principal photography in the second studio, how 'bout there?"

"We even have a second studio?"

"That's where we do editing and photography and that stuff. There's so much stuff that needs doing that I'm going to open even a third studio. That's why we got as many jobs as you'd like. So, positions open right now..."

She explained to me the positions in great detail, but as I did not understand the specifics of any of the jobs, in the end I returned to Motion Picture-chan.

"Ngggh... retake... reta..."

Being Motion Picture-chan required extraordinary effort.

However, my mind became free from disturbances as I moved my hands, and I tended to forget all I had to worry about.

About Grandfather's absence, the revitalization of Kusunoki, the outflow of population... ah well, things would improve no matter what I did, would they not?

I worried as I evasively worked by my hands, and the flow of time became bizarrely faster.

The next thing I noticed was that it was becoming night.

"Eeek, unpaid overtime!"

I hated to work overtime without payment.

In the present, where there was no hard currency for wages, it was valuable to finish working

as fast as possible.

I looked around to see that the near majority of the staff had fallen asleep on the floor or prostrate on their desks. They were girls, however... well, whatever I can think, they could go home, but all that awaited them was life in a tent anyway.

"Give these over to the animation director." "There's still a looong way to go before the color boards." "We could always outsource it to other villages." "If you say so, miss Director, then that's going to be aaall right."

I heard those words of feverish discussion between Y and the staff as they filtered through from the back.

"Well done..."

Falling prostrate on my desk and sleeping was, of course, pushing it. There were sleeping bags, but with a little bit of walking I could be go back home.

All right, then, let us get back home.

Sorry for leaving before you all! With a whispered goodbye I went to leave the tent when I found someone who feebly tugged the hem of my upper clothes.

"Mh?"

"...ahhh... ngggh..."

"Dear me, you are an in-betweenner as well, Assistant-san?"

Now that I said it, Assistan-san had artistic skills.

He was trying to talk to me about something with a face that looked like death.

"...what? Every time you submit your work you are told to retake, and you cannot fulfill your assigned quota? Ah-hah, I see everyone is being required to do the impossible."

What a relief, I was not the only one to have been made unreasonable demands of.

We had no duty to remain overtime unpaid, and with that reason we up and went back home together.

"My, ruins at night feel like the very idea of abnormal, for some reason, and that is a bad feeling indeed."

Walking down what used to be the main road before the destruction made it oddly clear that the place was deserted. And the Village used to be so colorful...

"Maybe it would be better to have the fairies rebuild it."

...whoopsie, the pattern of that was that things would end in trouble, indeed.

Careful, be careful before heedlessly setting flags.

Suddenly, Assistant-san, who was walking next to me, came to a halt. He was staring intently at a point of the ruins.

"What? There are fairies? Where?"

Where he was pointing at with a finger there were fairies using a ruin in the stead of stage, moving about with quite the delicacy. They were not wearing the usual fairy clothes, they had an elegance to them. They were something like showy military uniforms.

I recalled how, just recently, I had seen something of a similar scene.

"Yes, they are performing a play. There is no audience, however..."

Though it seemed to me that the fairies would quite definitely perform it anyway.

Lots of leaflets laid scattered at our feet.

"Unemployed theater troupe forms a new group! First public performance: The Best Guillotine Ever!", that was what was written on it. The illustration on it was bad.

"There is a difference between being seen by people and not being seen by them, and just that makes theirs basically a pretend-play."

Except they are a theater troupe?
 And with that implied question Assistant-san made a puzzled face.
 "They are shy, that is what."
 Even when fairies were like that I, inexplicably, felt close to them. They were easy to accustom to feeding from the hand, so to say, and, well, it was easy for this kind of things to happen.
 We decided to hide ourselves and peep into the fairies' play.
 Now then—
 A fairy in gaudy clothes was trodding our way, meaning the scene had begun.
 As he did, ahead of him came a fairy with of course gaudy clothes, and they began gossiping.
 A gaudily-dressed fairy approached that group.
 "Are you guys in middle of something?"
 I did not understand what he meant, but they somehow seemed to be words that invited trouble.
 That said, the gossiping fairies were not perturbed.
 "We're not middle school dropouts?" "I'd rather be in middle school." "We're extorting middle-schoolers for money." "We're in fourth grade of car school."
 "I see."
 For some reason, the gaudy fairy's fury had subsided.
 "So, who are you to ask that?," asked one of the gossiping fairies.
 "We are the country?"
 "...what?" "Donn'get that." "What's a country?" "Something you state?" "You can't put a country in a state of beriberi!"
 "It's exploitation disguised as a public good... I think?"
 "Isn't it now." "Could it be that we're being exploited?" "Then it's OK, I guess." "Nice, innit."
 "Tell us your name?"
 "Louis?," answered the gaudy fairy.
 "You know that there's lots of Louises around?"
 "Really!"
 "What a coincidence! We're all Louis too!" "Ain't none rare enough!" "These days, a mere Louis isn't profitable?"
 "Is that true?"
 "I'm Louis the Sixth." "Louis the Eighth." " Louis the Third" "Louis the Sixteenth." "Louis the Hundredth." "I'm Louisenko."
 "Well now, we're all Louises."
 It felt like the Louises had found a kindred spirit. Not all of them, of course. There was one among them who differed... but noticing this was the job of the audience.
 "Which number are you?"
 "Well, if you have to ask, I feel like I'm the Fourteenth."
 "Uh-huh." "That Fourteenth, didn't he do something?"
 "Like feel nice?"
 "Really?" "I'm so jealous!" "I'm gonna do just like him!" "House of Bourbons!" "Mister Fourteenth, do you like anything?"
 "Luxury?"
 "Really?" "I'm so jealous!" "I'm gonna do just like him!" "Guillotine!" "Right, guillotine!"
 A fairy-sized guillotine was dragged in from the stage's wings.
 An "excuse me...," and the Fourteenth was of course sweating. "Wasn't it the Sixteenth that

got the guillotine?"

He suddenly came out with the correct history.

"Eh?," went the Sixteenth.

"That's so right, it was the Sixteenth!" "The one who did it with Guillotine-tan?" "Sooo nice!" "Is a guillotine appropriate for a Country?"

The Sixteenth, who had been one of the gossipers, was taken completely by surprise.

"...why?"

"Who knows?" "Why's the question, now that you ask it." "Because he liked locks, maybe?"

"So that's why..."

"Don't want the guillotine?"

"The Fourteenth wants luxury, but I get the guillotine?"

"Yeah-yeah!" "Very much yeah!" "It's normal!" "Default!" "You mean like a mentality that's omnipresent in history?"

"...so I see...," and the Sixteenth one way or another accepted the guillotine.

"Please prepare the Best Guillotine Ever right here!" "Wah, this is just perfect!" "Mr. In Charge-taaaan!" "Now this makes for a good party!"

The Louises took the Sixteenth up to the guillotine's platform.

"Uhm... can I?"

"What, Sixteenth?"

He acted like someone suddenly faced with an overwhelming form of execution.

"I might just want to change clothes before the guillotine?"

The fairies conversed.

"I guess it's OK." "Tell us what kind of clothes you would like."

"The clothes of that person."

The Sixteenth pointed at the Fourteenth.

And with a "that's OK, I'd say," the two exchanged clothes.

"All right, I'm changed!" "Then it's guillotine time!" "Which of them was going to the guillotine?"

"The sixteenth?" "It's this guy!"

The one caught by both his sides was the Fourteenth in the Sixteenth's clothes.

"...eh?," and the Fourteenth dressed as the Sixteenth was set within the guillotine. "Are you sure?"

"I'm sure?"

"But... him, he's innocent, you see?"

"He exploited us?"

"...maybe he did!"

"Then it's the obvious ending!" "Right, that's right!" "Calm down, calm down!" "I love ginger ale!"

"Now that you say it, I do get the feeling that you're right!"

"So, do we guillotine him?"

"OK!"

...he said yes.

And then the guillotine's blade thumped as it fell. With perfect timing the fairies were clouded in darkness, and with just as perfect timing came the pleasant thump of the guillotine.

"Waaah!" "It cut!" "Nice and sharp!" "What else!"

After a few moments, the lights came on again.

And when they did, we found that a daikon radish had rolled off the guillotine, split in half.

The fairies all around the guillotine spoke out.

"You know that having a massive daikon split in half might be tastier?" "What an incredible guillotine, feels like it could execute even a baseball bat!" "Amaaazing!" "Can you believe that this guillotine only costs one pound!" "Better, right now there's one more feature in this guillotine!" "It's its being an indiscriminate vegetable execution device, of course!"

From nowhere in particular came an 'oooh' of wonder and an applause SFX.

...that was a marvelously low-level comedy.

Assistant-san and I looked at each other without a word. He had a face that said he had no idea about what he had just seen, and I believed I had the same expression as well. Because, see, if we wanted to poke fun at it, then we could do it as much as we pleased, so we instead became speechless. Well, this *thing* required making fun of at least in one point.

"An unemployed theater troupe... right."

These guys had too much time on their hands.

In these delicate times it was certain that them rampaging about would be a problem, certainly, but that only made them sort of pitiable.

With this and with that the days went by, and the next thing I noticed was that our masterpiece of animation was finished.

"...for some reason, with work of this kind time just flies."

Ignoring my dazedness from sequential all-nighters, Y rejoiced next to me, "it's done! It's done!"

"A masterpiece of three minutes, right..."

"Nope, this goes for thirty minutes," she also threw at me.

"And how could it? Are you using slow motion or something?"

"I would never do anything that dishonest," she also said. "We're only watering it down."

"That is against its moral, you know?"

Y looked stumped. She did not seem able to understand where the problem laid in what she had said.

"The main story will be tripled in length via editing, and after that we'll add commentary so runtime is once again eighteen minutes. Next we add in the credits roll and local ads, and one way or the other this comes out at thirty minutes."

"Hideous. Is that how you justify it?"

"Again, what's wrong with any of that?"

Everything.

"...do you have any love for content, do you not..."

"I have it that even at twenty-two minutes we could call it a thirty-minutes anime, so there shouldn't be any problem."

"What are you talking about? In what culture?"

"That's how things were! In the distant past, back when humanity was still on the ball, the publishing industry followed a concept of nominal circulation. That's similar to what we're doing, I think."

"Circulation I understand, but what is nominal in that?"

"Well, announcing that you printed more than you actually did."

"And why would you say you printed more?"

"To give a better impression, maybe? For example, let's assume that we have a monthly magazine and that it has printed an actual ten thousand copies. When announced it to the world, we say that our magazine has sold thirty thousand copies, that's how it works."

What she spoke about could have turned my eyes into sesame seeds.

"The actual real reason's uncertain, see. Still, that custom was there and that's a fact. It really was cultured to declare they sold way more than they actually had put out there. Well, it's a lie, but still, for some reason it made the readers, the publishers, and the editors happy. They reaped the benefits."

"Even though tripling it is far too much?"

"Ayup, that much was actually common."

"And so a three minute anime became thirty minutes long..."

Even if, supposing, there had once been such a culture, would reintroducing it be a good thing, I wondered? Once Y started running, she had a tendency of overlooking things that common sense would say were problematic.

"Careful there, you should only complain after watching it. And you still haven't seen the completed video, right? We're just about to have an advance screening, so come. It's fun to see your own pictures in color and moving."

"That they should be. Then I should go watch this nominally thirty minutes masterpiece of animation, indeed."

The screening party was shortly after that. And, as expected, it was held inside the massively huge gym-like tent.

"I thank you very much for accepting the invitation. This is a motion picture that every one of us has drawn. I hope that you enjoy it."

We had even invited K-san, the covert operative, with whom we were now friends with.

"Eeeeh... well, uhm... please try to enjoy this."

"There are a lot of people, I see."

"Dear me, so there are. These are from the tents my bureau also sent in."

I was thankful for the tents, at least. And yet, however, the conclusion... went something like this.

Without approaching me and my odd behavior, K-san put her hands together with a "by the way."

"That PocMon I had taken with me last time has escaped. Did you see it anywhere?"

"Eh? When was that?," I said, alarmed.

"I haven't seen it since evening. I'm worried because its battery might run out soon."

PocMon was the shortened alias for Pocket Monument (full name).

She was the actual perpetrator of the destruction of the village.

Originally a massive monolith it boasted a high power, one sufficient to turn the village into a wreckage once it ran rampant, but at present it had received the reduced sentence of fitting in the palm of a hand, and now served as a pet held by K-san.

"All because things went poorly and she sprouted a sense of quasi-ego... oh, seriously!"

"But she acts so precocious, she's so cute, you know? She has to be wandering somewhere around the Village, so if you see her anywhere, could you recover her for me?"

It was known among the residents that PocMon had destroyed the Village, so even if she were to have been found by someone who did not go as far as to destroy her, the probability that she would be mistreated was extremely high, and somewhat dangerous.

"Understood. We will find her for sure. And before any trouble starts."

"Thank you very much."

The advance screening had begun. We all saw *it*. All thirty minutes of *it*.

When projection finished, the swarm of people crawled out of the venue. Everybody had expressionless faces.

The next day, twenty-one people moved away from the Village.

"That was sooo awfully made!"

The correlation between the watered-down anime and the outflow of population was not clear.

Well, maybe it was.

"...b-, but as far as being the first work of beginners it ranks highly, doesn't it... hahah."

Y put on a brave face as she spoke that.

"But if you had not watered it down, then it would have been a better production..."

"I sort of remember reading in some text or book somewhere that anime can rebuild villages, though. So I thought that this plan was going to be good for hobby and profit both."

She was muttering that.

"Why did you not air the three minute version?"

"Because the general public isn't that simple-minded."

"Truly?"

I had the feeling that the more of them there were together the more simple-minded they became, however...

"Even if it's well-made, its shortness would be a source of criticism. Watering it down was necessary, you see. What we gotta do is make a movie that's twenty-two minutes long to begin with."

...and where would we find the labor force or the technology, to name two.

And in the midst of these village-building misfires due to low-level work, the hemorrhage continued even after that.

The play was eventually scheduled to stop due to excessive negative criticism, and people degenerated into a life of casually accepting given goods.

The other day it was twenty-one. Yesterday twelve. Today it will have been sixteen. And people will also leave tomorrow, of course. We were in a moving-out boom and by a generous margin.

"I wonder if this is how villages become abandoned."

The scent in the air was no longer about whether to fix the buildings or move to nearby villages.

If this kept up, Kusunoki Village might disappear during Grandfather's absence.

...this village where so many fairies gathered.

"...I am worried."

And the very moment where I started thinking that I should be asking the fairies about this,

"Good news for you and your worries!"

"Eeek!"

I reflexively shouted out at that mecha that had jumped on the table and was crawling like a bug.

Now that I looked closely, I remembered seeing this mecha before.

"Ah, PocMon! So you did not run out of battery power, incredible... you see, your owner was worried."

"Owner, that's so mean! AI discrimination ostracized! Please call us partners in a room-sharing deal!"

As she appealed to her human rights one of her many spiderlike legs went scritch-scratch (metallic sound) on her head, scratching it.

"Room sharing is fine, I suppose..."

My attention was drawn to what was clinging to her black body.

And the thing suddenly lifted a hand.

"Hiii!"

"Ah-, hi..."

There was a fairy hugging PocMon.

And he was not a normal fairy.

He had a plastic desk pad in hand.

"What is it? Is there something so problematic in my exterior that I have to alter the priority of my information processing units?"

"It was a mystery how you were still moving despite how your battery should have been completely drained, but... I see, I understand now."

"I'm charging her with static electricity, see?"

Charging her with that, of all things, truly...

"I had them set me to power saving mode, that's why. My residual battery charge doesn't really go down, in fact, at times it increases."

By the way, PocMon could not perceive the fairies neither in their appearance nor in their speech.

"Forget being doubtful about it, no, on the contrary, this is amazing. It is like you are a (heedless) human being, precisely so. A point that would make one believe you possess something that just barely resembles a soul-like thing."

"That's 'cause I'm energy efficient!"

She puffed out her chest in pride. Her body was actually flexible enough to literally do that.

"But even you do make some effort in an activity that is simply wasteful."

That I had said to the fairy.

"Juuust like wasting money!"

So, as long as this fairy did not lose interest and go away, PocMon could move without needing to charge up. Mh-mh.

"Wasteful, how mean! When I'm here with good news!"

I took the fairy's words as directed to myself.

...this was a tiring conversation.

"Ahhh, yes, sorry. So you said that you have good news? Let us hear them."

"BEGINNING ELECTRICAL CHARGING!"

Suddenly PocMon shouted that at the maximum volume, which startled me.

The fairy began rubbing the plastic desk pad on his head.

The accumulated static energy was charging PocMon, indeed.

"...sorry 'bout that. That was the system's voice. There's been frequent outbursts of 'beginning electrical charging' of late. I guess that's because I have good daily habits, right?"

An AI that was skilled at ceasing her thoughts might be on its own a wonderful thing.

"At present, my charge level is at 75%. A level that's just enough to call peckish. If I remain still like this, I will steadily get a full stomach."

"Uh-huh. Then you will no longer need this spare charging station."

"Well now! This house doesn't even spare some electricity for guests, then? How rude!"

"You are actually pretty shameless, are you."

I took out the spare charging station.

"The charging station!"

Cla-clonk, she jumped into the docking section.

"This is still not powered."

"Just sitting on it is relaxing."

...if she was an electrical intelligence, then was this her instinct speaking?

I pulled a starter that did not just control the docking station's plugs, but was also connected to other machines that needed power. The generation of power began with a loud sound.

"BEGINNING ELECTRICAL CHARGING!"

"It would be quite fine if you did not shout that out every single time."

"To put it in human terms, it's like a moan of strain escaping your mouth when you wake up. It's difficult to contain them voluntarily. Besides, I want people around me to know when I'm charging up. For some reason I just have that urge. This feeling, what is it...?"

"Oooh!," I was impressed. "That is without doubt something like the instinct of a home appliance. As appliances will eventually create their own civilization, a name will be given to that feeling, I am sure. This is the birth of Morality. The past humanity also repackaged a lust for expansion as love. The Earth of tomorrow is in your hands."

"...you can tell me all of whatnot's in my hand, but the way you do so is impossible for me to understand..."

Getting back on topic.

"So, what are the good news?"

"There's a good way to resurrect Kusunoki Village."

"Is that true? That is what I am seeking. Tell me what it is please." (Said in monotone.)

"So you want to know, so you do!"

PocMon bent her body, pliable from being able to change its shape via electricity, and pushed herself forwards and backwards. It was the pride of the victorious. It was a pointless waste of electricity.

"Via augmented reality!"

"Augmented reality... I do not know what that means."

"To explain in a few words, it fills the space with data, it's beautiful and it's convenient."

"I see. I do not understand."

"That's because it's a technology lost long in the past. But it appears that part of its data still exists. Somewhere there's a surviving server, you see."

"There is infrastructure for it still usable? Really?"

"SEARCHING FOR DEVICE!"

"Bwah!"

"I found a machine that supports augmented reality in the next room."

"Please stop announcing every little thing with a mechanical voice at maximum volume already. It startles me. This is a lack of electronic delicacy."

PocMon had no ears to listen to me with.

"There, over there!"

"...in the temporary storage?"

Devices such as Fairy Tools, of use unknown but that one day could prove useful, were proactively preserved by the Office of Mediation.

"What does it look like?"

PocMon crystallized part of her body and showed me the shape of that device.

"Binoculars, I believe?"

The size of the display was on the small side so I could not quite tell, but I did have some idea as to what it may have been.

"...I have brought them with me. Are these the ones?"

"It's precisely those! Now then, quickly, look over there, please!"

She pointed repeatedly towards the outside of the window with one leg.

I tried charging the binoculars and turning them on. It was not like one needed to turn on

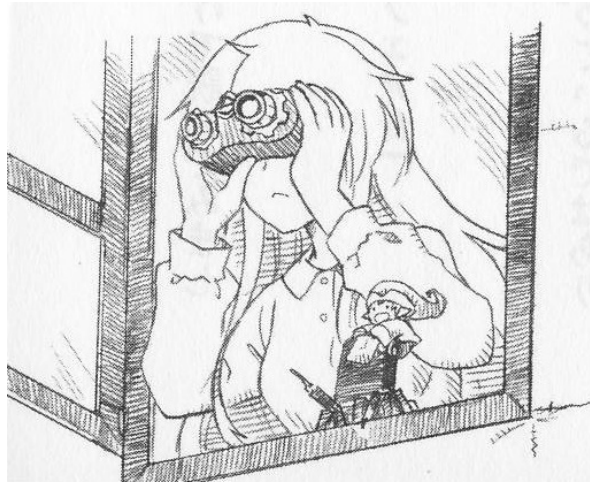
normal binoculars to use them, but there was some mysterious machinery attached to them. I understood, the reason for it was that it was used for augmented reality.

"Hmmm, well, I can see that dreary citadel you built back during the trouble you made last time."

"It's in the sky above it. The data fill is left over there."

"Ah, it is true."

I tried pointing the binoculars upwards and discovered something that looked like what I was searching for.



It was not, in actuality, a hologram suspended in midair, it was something projected there by the lenses of the binoculars. Since it was data displayed with the proper sense of distance to it, I saw it as a puffy string of text floating in the air.

Of course, so this was augmented reality, just as she said.

I increased the binoculars' magnification by 8X and read the words and the map floating in the air. They went something like this:

Toilets / Charging Area Over Here / ☆Fresh Vegetable Burger Sale☆

"There are things like directions towards public facilities and advertising... I suppose?"

I searched for other things, and found many other messages and guiding arrows floating here and there in the air.

"First of all, why are the words up in the air?"

"My inference is that in the past there may have been a skyscraper there."

"Ah, I see. That is understandable."

That meant that the building collapsed and that only the data associated with it remained in the same position.

"Uh-huh, so this is what augmented reality is."

It was not that it was written literally in the air, of course, the computers merely had their location memorized. The compatible device received the data from those computers and displayed it.

These would certainly be convenient.

For example as guidance.

A land visited for the first time was filled with things that a visitor would not know or

understand. Having the location of toilets or the hospital and other services shown on-site would help quite a bit.

"However, having to look through binoculars or be unable to see that is a little inconvenient."

"I believe that if you search, you'll find lots of other compatible devices."

"Are there any more in this Office?"

"SEARCHING FOR ANOTHER DEVICE!"

"Bwah, so loud..."

It was an alarm, so it was set for the loudest volume.

I had better adjust that later...

"I've changed the parameters and searched again. It kind of looks like this."

The icon being displayed, again on her body, showed the device's model number and type.

I easily discovered it while searching the warehouse.

"...wait, this is a microscope!"

It was an augmented reality compatible microscope.

"Of course, there aren't any laws that say you can't augment the micro world."

"This is of no use, is it not."

I tried using it.

The thing I examined... was rainwater filling a puddle.

"I am seeing something like... a microbe... I wonder why..."

"What's the data attached to it say?"

"It is not colored in, but the fungus is surrounded by a fluorescent light. It is like its contours are being traced by a fluorescent pen. This makes it easier to see, it is a good thing."

Easily distinguishing cells often required, even these days, coloring them with a pigment before observing them, but there was no such work needed to be done here.

"It is a good thing, but... are there germs that would benefit from having something attached to them that said, say, 'toilets this way'...?"

"Input mistakes are highly probable. Human error, to say it."

"Even bugs might want to go to the toilet?," went the fairy.

"...an augmented reality microscope, then, interesting."

I now wanted to try it on all sort of things.

The second thing I surveyed... a potato.

"The starch! This potato's starch... it is decorative! It is decostarch!"

And which young lady and where was to blame for that!

The third thing I surveyed... blood (harvested from a scrape I accidentally got in the warehouse).

"Sooo, red blood cells look like candies. Are they apple flavored? Plum flavored?"

"If you want to make more, that'd be my pleasure?," went the fairy.

The fourth thing I surveyed... I was still searching for.

"No more micro things around, nothing more micro? Awww, I want to see something more micro..."

PocMon asked this to me as I was pacing the room.

"And the rebuilding of the Village?"

...right, that.

This was not the time to play around searching for micro-things.

"In short, my proposal is about using this augmented reality to color the Village into something more Cool & Digital."

"In this age people gather around the lands that are more interesting. I think this is quite the good idea. But are there not too many challenges?"

First of all, we had to distribute devices supporting augmented reality to the people of the Village. Where would we procure that many devices?

Also, no matter how much we augmented it, nothing will change the fact that we were living in tents. There was a limit to how much make-up one could try to dress that pig up with.

Lastly, there was how to construct data for the augmented reality.

To fill the space of Kusunoki Village with information and data one, first of all, would of course have to carry out an electronic survey. With those cyberspace coordinates as basis we could fill the Village with all sorts of images and data.

As far as the server machine with which to process that multitude of information we could repurpose the high-level computer in PocMon's real body, but the surveying was a job that had to be done on location, and would require tremendous amounts of time and effort.

"It won't take that much time or effort, you know? I've already done it."

"Eh? The surveying?"

"Today I've been photographing around the Village. It's not yet finished, still we can construct the cyberspace right away, see?"

"Y-, you ran away in order to do that, then..."

She was being all too proactive.

But thanks to that, this felt viable.

The Village's people for themselves made the play, Y for herself enjoyed making the anime to the fullest, so maybe I myself could also contribute a project?

"...I suppose we could do it."

"Let's do it!"

"But tricking a viewer with virtual image despite how the Village is in ruins, now... how would we do that?"

"I've heard all about this. Could you let me participate as well?"

Y had come by.

"Ugh."

"That augmented reality thing resembles anime, see."

"In what?"

"Anime means transparent cell drawings where at least characters are drawn on top of background pictures. Augmented reality has a reality which had at least positional information inserted on top of it. These two feel like they really resemble each other."

She was talking enthusiastically.

"Wait. Augmented reality can only show, for example, the way to the toilets, can it not?"

"You're narrow-minded."

"Huh?"

It was the first time in my life that I received that criticism.

"You're lacking imagination. How normal. Boring, also worthless. Tedious. This technology has infinite capabilities, what do you think you're going to get done by dismissing it as arrows pointing at the toilets!"

"...you say this and you say that, but the speaker likes to get carried away by relationships between men over flat surfaces."

"The flat surface part will be gone. These are stereoscopic images, right? Though wanting

flowers to show on a wall is flat-surface, I suppose. This is electronic data, and I believe that, in the past, people walking the street could see it shown in three dimensions."

"Displaying a human model that moves, however, takes its own time and effort," went PocMon.

"...aren't there softwares for that stuff? Something that could make a human into a 3D model that can move about freely?"

"There are! And it's not just humans, even buildings and small sheds were library-fied. As long as you're not too fussy about their designs, just laying out these models and making them speak will turn this into something like a three-dimensional anime."

"But I'm fussy, of course. The participating staff hasn't been revealed yet. How many people do we need for this..."

She was too good at her job when it came to this sort of things. Maybe it was some sort of disease?

"Hey, this is not some game, you know? It is the restoration of the Village, you know? And my Grandfather is not here, you know? You would have to take responsibility, you know? Are you sure?"

"No, you're the representative."

"Hey!"

I was worried, because if she used the Village as backstage for some augmented reality anime, then it might end in a replica of the outflow of before.

When I was about to bring that up, the Office had one new guest.

"H-, hey! T-, the Office of Mediation, is it here?!"

Her age was about the same as ours. It looked like she was pregnant, as she was holding a big belly with her hands as she stood there. She was YoungMama-san (tentative).

"Why did you put your office so high up!"

And that exclamation was a representative of how furious she was, meaning we had to hastily and very politely take her to the reception area (which was just a space in the Office separated by a partition).

"And besides, isn't the fourth floor just empty space! And it's all staircase access only, what is the meaning of that?"

For the person who had to do the job of attending to the visitor, her complaints required the same care as when dealing with something combustible.

"Well, what are we going to do? Apologize?"

"Wait. Apologizing means publicly declaring that there was a problem, which is inconvenient for ratings. This should be dismissed with an insincere smile and not making a fuss."

"Hey, I can hear everything, you know! That's not the problem I have!"

"W-, well then, what might you need?"

"You made me climb so many stairs, I'm thirsty."

"I'll get some tea..."

Then she tossed another request to Y, who was headed towards the office kitchenette as if trying to run away.

"I try to avoid black tea. Could I have just warm water?"



Once she drank some warm water, she relaxed at last.

"So, what are you here for?"

"That's obvious. The problem of how we have no doctors."

"What do you mean we do not? Are they perhaps away on a trip?"

"No they're not, they all moved away and now the Village has no more doctors, that's the problem. You're a Mediator, of all things, and you didn't know about this?"

It seemed likely that she was the short-tempered type of person, because she said this with irritation.

Y agreed like she had just remembered something.

"Ahhh, that's right. They both moved."

"Did they?"

The Village had two doctors, one male and one female.

The lady doctor was the one who helped me back when Assistant-san was still new.

And, with no relation to her, here also dwelt an older male doctor.

The presence of doctors rose the safety sense of the land in tremendous ways. As long as those two were here, the Village may well have been called a city.

But, as it happened, both of them moved away, that was what had happened.

"It's true. Both of them were among the emigrants."

I looked again at the emigration list and found it was true. There were so many things on my plate that I had missed them.

The young lady caressed her swollen belly and said,

"So, this is the worst possible time for a baby to be a breech birth."

"Breech birth, that makes birthing difficult, is that correct?"

Normal birth = the baby is born head first.

Breech birth = the baby is born feet first, but delivery is quite difficult, in other words it is a problem birth.

"Indeed. If this breech birth remains as it is, worst comes to worst, it's possible to do a C-section."

"C...?"

"Section...?"

We finally grasped the problem in this situation.

"T-, this is an alarming situation, what do you say?"

"Right, this is seriously problematic."

Although there are no doctors, it might come to be inevitable to perform a C-section on this birth.

It was so terrifying I felt my mind wander away.

"This is truly a serious problem," I agreed with her from my heart. It was no lip service. I actually did think that. "So, what did you come here to discuss?"

Except my tongue slipped.

"○x△□!!!"

For a moment, a vulgar expletive I could not quite record bathed all over my body. It was a benefit given my beauty (blatant lie).

The next thing I noticed was that Y had disappeared (the God-tier escapist), meaning I ended up in the awkward position of receiving the lady's anger alone.

But even her fury eventually subsided.

"This is truly serious, that's obvious! A lack of doctors would be a serious situation! Aren't you thinking it is?! And I want you to do something! Understand that!"

"I am sorry, I had much to be concerned about lately... I also tend not to sleep enough."
 "You can fix a trifle like lack of sleep with some motivation! So, do you have any way to help?"
 Now then, a way to invite the doctors that had left back to the Village... it was not like there were none. If I petitioned for the UN's support in a relief program they would certainly dispatch a doctor.
 "My, and isn't that just right!"
 "It is just that they come at a designated period of time. Reservations must be made a month and a half in advance."
 "...eh?"
 "Their term of stay is a maximum of one week. We need to know the accurate delivery date to ensure that it falls within the doctor's stay. Does this manage to satisfy you?"
 "Like it ever could! This isn't office work!"
 "What day is your delivery scheduled for? It would not be that far off, I believe."
 "The date is more or less halfway through the month, but... I have this feeling it may be off... so I would like to have a doctor for more than one week, with preparations kept ready for a delivery in case it's actually off. There's the possibility that the baby will actually be ready to be born at any moment, you see? That is the conclusion I'd like you to draw!"
 "...I-, I will consult with those above."
 Although I could say that, this was a serious problem.
 "Will you do that? Whew, that's a relief. This is going to be all right."
 "No, I am not guaranteeing that everything will go as promised, this is still quite uncertain, furthermore, the Village at this moment is on the brink of death, in other words who knows what the result of all that effort will be..."
 "Then I guess I'm going home."
 Complete relief on her face, YoungMama-san stood up straight with quite the agility.
 ...I failed to give her any real warning as to how this could turn up.
 "By the way, what's this? It's bizarre for being a decoration."
 She pointed at PocMon and the fairy, who had failed to escape in time and were now not moving one millimeter, pretending to be a desk decoration.
 "Ah, that. It is a... a hand-made clock."
 PocMon ad-libbed writing the current time on her body.
 "It's gonna be Sweets Time soon!"
 The fairy announced that like it was the time.
 "Huuuh, how interesting. But it's right before noon at the moment, you know?"
 "I could not quite set it correctly..."
 "Uh-huh. Then I leave the rest to you. Bye bye!"
 After she had left I grasped my head.
 "I wonder why problems keep piling on top of each other all at the same time."
 "Does it look like Sweets Time is gonna be soon for real?", went the fairy.
 "...I will... I will make some... so please, let me stay depressed for another minute..."

After a while I was done being depressed, so all that remained were the procedures required for action.

Step one was to take out some general-use paper.

First was a letter of consultation to the UN, the text went something like *"there are no doctors in Kusunoki Village, do something!"*. Though, thinking precisely about the round trip time of the caravan, unless they processed this swiftly they would not make it in time for the expected

day of the birth.

Next, I petitioned for a doctor on call on dates overlapping with the expected day. Supposing the doctor came as expected but the delivery not be on the correct day it would be more or less of a problem, however at this point we could use a doctor in any fashion.

Next I sent out a letter to the two who had moved away. What I wrote boiled down to *"we have a pregnant woman, so come back, at least temporarily."* But since I did not know under which circumstances the two had moved it was far too much to expect anything.

I inquired about an obstetrician in neighboring villages, as well. All of these would require some time for a reply.

The low-cost ways of dealing with the problem ended with these.

So, as for what I could do next...

I stood up and PocMon woke up from low-consumption mode and opened his mouth (?) very timidly, just like she were a young girl about to pester me for something.

"Say, ma'am, how about... the augmented reality?"

"I want to try it, still."

"I so hope it will assist in the recovery of the Village, I honestly think that."

If the augmented reality was set up correctly and caused the repatriation of the doctors... such a fleeting expectation to have.

"...I suppose we should do all we can do."

"Really? Awesome!"

PocMon's back shot up straight.

"I will say that first of all, this is coincidental to the rest of my work, all right?"

The rest of my work did not leave me much free time.

"Yes ma'am!"

Work related to the UN passed through the Office of Mediation no matter what it was, therefore, be it individual petitions or requests to know the current population, everything of that sort passed through my hands at least once. Even documents that only needed to be passed along still required examining and signing, and work like that overlapped dozens of matters, making me quite busy. Among them there were matters that could not be solved with documents, so I could say that I actually had not that much time left over after dealing with what was not ordinary work. But I weaved through the ordinary matters so that we could walk around the Village and inquire.

We were asking for people among the residents who had experience with giving birth.

Before noon I did my proper job. Afternoons I ran about, and as my daily life normalized into one of returning to the Office late, two weeks quickly passed.

"...nothing here. You?"

Y said that with a thoroughly tired face.

"...nothing either. I found people who had witnessed births, but not a single one of them was a breech delivery."

"Same here. Everybody was sort of tense about the idea of a breech birth. Got this feeling that we've finally hit a bad trend. At worst, if she gotta give birth without preparation, how will it end?"

"Eh... how will it end? Now how will it end..."

It was so terrifying that I could not imagine it.

"What about you, Assistant-san?"

Even he, as expectable, had fallen prostrate on his desk as soon as he had returned, and

now lifted up his head like it felt heavy and shook it left and right.

"Regardless, we have to find something to do..."

Kusunoki was among the more prosperous villages, but it was not like its population was in the tens of thousands.

Our search had hit a complete dead end in that space of barely two weeks.

Also, we started getting replies to the letters I sent everywhere. However, the results could be fairly called disastrous. Particularly nasty were the two doctors who had left the Village,

"My apologies. Breech births are beyond my area of expertise. As I can't take responsibility, I can't help."

So went the reason for refusal in their replies, which I personally strongly sympathized with.

...besides, obstetricians themselves were sort of rare to begin with. Worse, things like breech births were rare. It was expectable that we would not find any.

"We have no more ways of dealing with this except to ask those in the private sector if anyone has performed breech deliveries, and have them answer in painstaking detail."

"Didn't we ask most everyone around here already? You wanna go to other villages?"

We looked at each other and simultaneously exhaled sighs.

If we did that, the delivery date would rush up on us in an instant.

We really had no idea of what to do.

"...mh? Did someone toss a pebble or something at my face?"

Y put fingers on her forehead and said that.

"I did not throw anything."

"Well, someone certainly threw something at me. Stop acting so bullish!"

"But I told you that I was not the one!"

"...then... no way, Assistant-kun?"

Stared at by Y's distrustful eyes he in a panic waved his hands left and right.

"Then it was PocMon. Where did she go?"

"PocMon is in my breast pocket. Here, see."

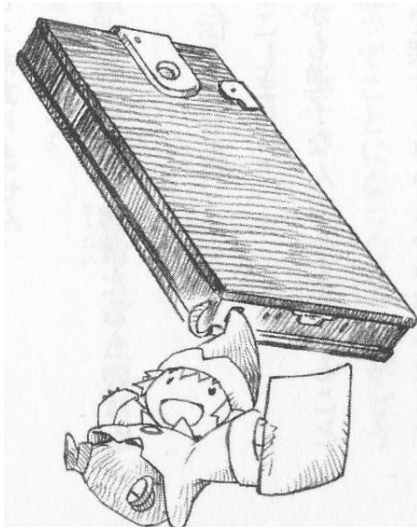
I took out the black metal plank and showed it to her.

With the multi-leg unit ultrabase removed all that remained was the plank part, so besides being unable to move on its own, it was impossible that she could perform any other action.

"I h-, have a... trauma... about tossing stones..."

Having seemingly remembered the previous events, her entire body shuddered.

"Yeah, that's an excuse I can buy. By the way, the thing has a fairy dangling from it... what is it?"



"Don't call me a cellphone strap, OK," answered the fairy himself.

"Strap, like some string used to dangle something? I don't get what you mean."

"In past cultures there was that tradition, you see."

"Smartpho-ho!"

"So, why stuff PocMon with that strap or whatever in your breast pocket, of all places?"

"She was built out of universal materials, so she has all sorts of convenient functions. Like this... she can become a touchscreen, so you type in and keep memos, use her as a calculator, and she is useful as a bit of a pocket light, can take photographs, can scan, search data, and play games..."

"Bweh, but if you did all that the battery's gonna run out right away, right."

"It seems that everything is fine as long as this here is dangling from her."

Poked, the fairy swayed back and forth.

"Wanna make 'er charged? Want it?"

"Huuuh, so he charges her? That's convenient."

"By the way, as far as games I have Solitaire, Freecell, Minesweeper and more."

"All drug-like applications that in the distant past, back when humanity was still in good health, would have likely put a large number of workers at risk of dismissal... but you can't be telling me you've been skimping out on work, right."

"I would never play games at times as jam-packed with things to do as now. It would speak trouble to my self of tomorrow. It is just that, despite having become this size, she keeps searching for and downloading data off on her own."

"I just can't resist doing that. It feels good to proactively search for data with an old last-updated date. I can't fight this pleasure."

All because the wireless technology of the last of humanity was so developed, of course.

Doing what amounted to pilfering data from storages buried every which where would not be difficult.

"That body you got right now doesn't have that large a memory storage area, keep pointlessly messing about with data and you'll blow a fuse before you can so much as blink."

"When too much data accumulates I make sure to send it to the real monument, so it's all right."

"Huh, despite how there's no more point in accumulating data."

Y shrugged.

"If I am to say it, she is a convenient tool. Just, there is exactly one thing I am not pleased with..."

"Just?"

"Well, the text input mode on the touchscreen uses this bizarre flick input... I cannot quite get used to it."

"If you get used to it, there's a high probability you will be able to input really fast," PocMon said.

"What's with you saying that so suggestively?"

"I want you to let me input on a normal keyboard."

"QWERTY input isn't elegant, so I hate it."

And as we were talking so pointlessly we noticed that, thump, a hard sound resounded faintly in the Office.

"Ah, wasn't there someone throwing pebbles?," went Y.

"So it appears. But... where from?"

"According to my sensors, it seems that they're being thrown from outside the window, you see?"

"Outside the window, you say, but this is the fifth floor..."

We all stuck our necks outside the window.

There she was. Right below us.

"Ah, it's cadet YoungMama."

YoungMama-san, who had been tirelessly throwing pebbles, shouted at us in bits and scraps.

"I-, I've, been calling you, so many times...!"

She was panting.

Her belly had become one size larger.

"What do you need?," I shouted.

"The fifth floor... is too much... come do~wn!"

Y and her high skills at self-preservation opened her mouth.

"Gotta be about the doctor."

"Indeed."

Still, could we ignore her?

Y stormed away, so I headed to the first floor alone.

"Erm, what do you need today?"

"Don't you come and ask me what I need today! So, have you found a good doctor?"

"Sad to say that I could not quite find any..."

"I don't believe this! The baby is about to be born! S-, she can't be born on her own, you know?"

"What about your family?"

"I'm from the poorhouse. I don't have anyone, no parents."

"Hmmm-hm, then the husband?"

"We separated."

"If you do not mind me asking, what was the reason?"

She stared firmly at my face. Then said this.

"...one morning, when I stared straight at his face, I realized that it wasn't actually a face I liked."

"Huh?"

"I used to think that I really liked it, so maybe it was a difference in lighting? And that moment I

thought I went an' made a mistake. That's the reason."

"I cannot quite understand what are you saying."

"I-told-youuu, one morning my feelings completely changed because of something that felt like waking up from a dream, seriously! That kind of thing happens often, you know?"

"It does not. After all, you married because of love, right? Why would you... like a child tired of his toy..."

"Being able to love him after that would've been for the best. But I came to feel like that, so there was nothing to be done. I do think it a little excessive, too, but it was a physiological reaction and it was beyond helping, see?"

"H-, how mean. That was more than a little bit mean, you know? I might pity your husband a bit."

"He's not my husband, he's my ex-husband."

"This is one hundred percent your fault, so how about taking him back with you despite all that?"

If we had the cooperation of the husband it would significantly reduce the number of things to be worried about.

"Never! He does want to reconcile whatever the cost, but that's impossible for me. Yep, that way of putting it feels perfect. Emotionally speaking that's 'impossible' for me."

Was this woman some demon, then?

I was tormented by a terribly nasty feeling.

But this extremely irresponsible change in her life and whatever dangers involved her baby were, sad to say, entirely different issues.

"So, what do I do? Is the Office of Mediation unable to help one mother?"

"...no... that is not what I am saying, however..."

"I see, that's a relief. I don't have many acquaintances older than I am. What I'm hoping for is a doctor with plenty of experience, and I'd be so happy if she took several women experienced with giving birth with her."

As far as the latter, we had as many as we pleased.

It was just, however, that all of them refused to be present...

It felt like my back had been finally pushed against a wall.

I had not found so much as an obstetrician, which meant the probability that I would have to attend was high, what was I going to do about that?

Chills pierced my body whole.

Anyone... at this point, as long as they're a doctor, anyone would do, even an oculist, anyone! That was what I sincerely felt.

"Found 'em! I found 'em! Ahahaha, awesome, right, I did it! With this one we'll manage somehow!"

Good news had come.

The next day, Y rushed in very good spirits into the office (which I had, by my sole decision, moved to the first floor).

"So you found at least one!"

I pushed off the desk as I stood up.

I had been waiting for this. For a godsend like this. I felt my heart, clouded this whole day, quickly clear up.

"I guess there's such a thing as process, because despite making so much effort in searching for 'em, once searched for they were very easily found. Myyy, I was actually emotionally

moved!"

"Indeed, indeed, I feel exactly the same! Tonight we should open up some of our finest reserve wine!"

"That's nice! Then I'll be bringing some tasty cheese!"

We took each other's hands and danced round and round. It was the dance of happiness.

"So, how did it go? Please tell me in detail."

I excitedly asked that to Y as I served carefully, very carefully, a coffee drip by drip.

"Well, magazine freebies were in our blind spot."

"....."

I contemplated that with a serious face for about fifteen seconds.

But I did not understand. I could never have understood.

"What does that mean?"

"Well, it's all about magazine freebies. Not that I know when the magazines came out, though, mind. They looked mostly rotten through. Only the freebies were well-preserved. The things were kept in a nearby village."

This was getting harder and harder to understand.

"Preserved... like corpses?"

"Hm? I'm not talking about dead bodies here."

"This is about doctors, no?"

"Hm? Weren't you talking corpses? How did doctors come up in there out of nowhere?"

The two of us had vigorously passed each other by without meeting.

"I mean, you did not discover a doctor's corpse, correct?"

"I'm talking freebies here."

"And talking about doctors was not out of nowhere."

"But it was, and tremendously so..."

"What to discuss at this point is only that. If you take a longer-term view, it was definitely not out of nowhere."

"Wouldn't even the dawn of mankind come out of nowhere when taking a long-term view?"

"I am not speaking to those extremes!"

Our discussion had become confused.

I took a moment to rearrange my now-tangled thoughts.

"Uhhmm... would these freebies have something to do with augmented reality?"

"So you do get it. Yep, I found 'em at last. Enough augmented reality-enabled devices to hand around the residents, that is."

In an instant I snatched the cup of coffee from Y's hands and gulped down the thing, still steaming and fragrant, in a single go.

"Seriously, you, is making people's pleasures short-lived a new hobby?"

"That is my line!"

"Mnh, amazing! They are extremely well-preserved! Marvelous!"

In some remote village somewhere, covered in dust from being in a warehouse, there was this large wooden crate. And PocMon, who observed from an electronic viewpoint (scanned) the things inside, was ecstatic.

"They are all, and no mistake, augmented reality-enabled glasses!"

As she was in Smart (legless) mode and could not run by herself, PocMon rejoiced by making her body like gum and bouncing around.

"...unbelievable, what a grandiose generation there had to be that a computer-related weekly

magazine would have such a high-level electronic machine as augmented reality-compatible glasses as a freebie."

I was taken aback, but PocMon explained things to me.

"No, maybe these didn't cost that much. Although they have incredible capabilities, they were lower-spec than market products at the technological standard of the time. These appear to have been made by pouring a special syrupy liquid in a mold followed by an electrical treatment to turn them into electronic devices. With no one's hands touching the thing, costs had be virtually nil."

It was no more than the coupons we occasionally get in the local circular notice in present days.

"Even freebies have declined."

The glasses had been put in plastic cases that had little thickness and could therefore be sealed in with the magazine.

I tried taking one in hand and found they did not have the firmness that could make them be called glasses. They fit perfectly well in the hand, instead, and were of a material that was inexplicably soft to the touch.

"Did I not feel something like this elsewhere?"

Where was it?

As far as shape, these were less glasses and more a face mask.

The one I chanced upon was light green, but there were others, red, green, pink, there certainly were in a variety of colors. Which color one lucked upon was part of the anticipation of opening the seal. These freebies were the symbol of a generation of plenty.

The lens and the frame parts were of the same material, so it felt certain that they had been molded together. Doing that would certainly make it possible to lower costs. These flabby lenses definitely had the characteristics of optics, which gave us a peek into the technological skills of the era.

Y equipped a blue mask on her face.

"Them things're freezing. They're like a poultice."

Ahhh, no wonder I felt them familiar to the touch.

"I think these things've a mechanisms that uses the absorbed body heat to power themselves, so there's no need for batteries. Bof, at the current stage they're no more than masks, though, see."

"The technology is known as thermoelectric conversion. It exchanges body heat for electricity," said PocMon.

Following after the two, I also wore the mask.

"Ngggh, it is so cold."

Feeling that meant that the mask's components were efficiently extracting body heat, of course. What in the beginning were only a film of transparent lenses eventually displayed faint letters.

"Ah, it is true. After I wore them for a moment they turned on."

"Thermoelectric conversion is low in efficiency, so all they can take is a faint amount of electricity, but the masks themselves are low-consumption in the first place, so that's enough to power them. Should the display become fainter, the most efficient thing to do is take them off and flap them a little to cool them down, then wear them back," went PocMon.

Given also that they were freebies, they looked cheaply made in some regards.

"Cheaply made or not, their performance is adequate. In fact, having no complicated machinery to them should make them easier to be accepted by everybody else.

A countless number of these attachments had been packed inside the wooden crate. With a number like this not only we could make the rounds of the Village, we might be able to rent them out if, for example, visitors came by.

So, reviving the Village with augmented reality...

It now felt like it was possible.

"Our creation of a hyperspace is proceeding on schedule. Including the square, it's already possible to cover three wards in with information. How to cover them depends on sense of style, however, I have massive volume of temporary data of images and other things I picked up that we can decorate them with," went PocMon.

"Huh. So it is up to us to decide how the Village will be augmented?"

"Leave it to me, all to me♪!"

Y was in an excessively good mood.

Should we actually manage to revitalize the Village using augmented reality, how many people will we manage to get then?

First of all, in order to call for people, toilets were an important issue.

Fortunately, Kusunoki had inherited, and managed for hundreds of years, clean septic tank-style public toilets. It was just that the location was difficult to figure out, so having some means of guiding visitors to them would indeed make life easier.

"Preparations done. Go on," went PocMon

Y and I wore the masks and stared at the area above the square.

The text *Toilets this way* → brightly blinked there.

"Yup, perfect."

Still, I just hoped that people would regain passion for restoring the place thanks to this service we were doing them.

"A bright tomorrow for people with a Village that is easy to live in..."

"That's naive."

Y protested.

"...what did you say?"

"I said you're naive. Naive like a young parent that makes children without thinking about anything."

"How about not phrasing it in ways that it would make enemy of a great many people?"

She hated people like YoungMama-san, do understand.

Similarly, I of course did not think the reason for her separation from her husband to be quite acceptable.

"I do understand what you want to do."

"Huh, do you?"

"A three-dimensional anime, of course!"

"...well, there's something of that, too, but it's only one idea among hundreds..."

She said that with the edge of her lips quivered and a face that said I had hit the mark.

"And would that really call people over?"

"Of course!"

"Did you not say the same thing back when we were doing the anime?"

"I didn't."

"You did."

"I didn't!"

"You very much did!"

"li diid noot!"

"Yooou soo diid!"

A she-said-she-did-not-say verbal quarrel had started... but after wasting plenty of time in our *said* quarrel, we were back to our original topic.

"Anyway, as far as I am concerned, I would have no complaints if we made this into something well-discussed that revitalizes the Village and causes doctors to live in it."

"That I can guarantee. Ideas I got a mountain of, yeah, ideas I do."

Was that going to go well in the end?

When a reference manual was difficult to understand, one drew a line and wrote memos on the margins.

This thing called augmented reality was the same.

For example, when one lost their way to their destination, simply looking at the map would make them more confused, as it was impossible to understand. So they misunderstood it. They went the wrong way. A fair amount of people also existed that were not good with maps. But if the shortest route were displayed (with arrows and color-emphasis) above the actual scene as seen through the lenses of these glasses, then they would be able to reach their destination without getting lost.

Just like a reference manual became easier to understand, so did reality.

Also, besides being convenient in their functions, these machines were promising on the aspect of entertainment.

There were those who doodled in their reference books, of course. Now people could graffiti reality. Not only were flat pictures acceptable, three dimensional ones could be used at will.

What attracted this response from Y were these types of uses.

With augmented reality it was quite difficult to see an image unless one was staring straight at the actual thing, but I believed that recalling the relationship between background and cell images from the anime we had made, plus some effort, we could maybe make at least the nuances understandable.

Now then, what kind of machinery was necessary to make reality?

Generally, it would be possible to replicate it if one had things like these:

- Computers capable of working as servers (if possible capable of anything);
- Terminals compatible with augmented reality (if possible something eyeglasses-like);
- A location system that can see compatible devices (if possible with high precision);
- Data to be displayed (if possible the kind that would revitalize a village).

How amazing! We had everything!

For the first, the server, we used the People's Monument.

Its artificial intelligence was removed, but it had the right specs as far as a computer went. It had high levels of communication capabilities, and we could wirelessly submit all sorts of data from here. It used a high level fuzzy logic and was easy to use, plus we had PocMon who could intervene, meaning it was a smooth ride in every way in the developmental aspect.

The terminals were these masks.

They have individual sensing functionalities within which could monitor where the wearer was facing and what angle their neck was craned. If the angle of the head changed, the images had to adjust themselves to fit that, see.

The locational system had to have a grasp on the position of nearby terminals. By installing receivers that worked as relay stations here and there in the Village they would coordinate with the server and construct a system. The functionalities of the receivers was simple, and as long as we set up beefy sensors that could receive and send signals and acquire data from their surroundings, we could repurpose them even if the eras they were built in were a bit different. The warehouse was full of things of that sort.

Things such as searching for them and making all related adjustments were performed by PocMon, so our job was only to set them up in various locations around the Village.

Preparations were completed in about half a day.

"Here we are, temporary data's done!"

Y and Assistant-san both walked in together.

"He would be *our* Assistant-san, however."

"Borrowed 'im for a while. He's all yours now."

"Oh, seriously..."

Y flapped a portable computer the size of a small book.

"Then please let me access it, all right."

PocMon was rioting inside my pocket, so I did as she asked and connected her.

"I love wired connections."

Soon as she said that she fell silent, and in the stead of her voice we heard playing the sound of nature mixed with the chirping of a small bird that seemed to say *please wait*.

"Done! The service is ready!"

"What, already?"

"Well, at the lowest possible capabilities."

Very well then, and that how we all promptly tried wearing our masks.

"...woah, but this is..."

"Is something going on?" "Looks like it!" "Maybe it's a human!" "Looks like it!" "What did you do at times like these?" "Was there something we should be doing?" "Feels like we didn't do it." "We forgot!" "Anyone here remembers?" "This proud samurai does!" "That's going too far!" "So, what do we do?" "Maybe the road ahead is closed?" "Huh!" "Huh!" "That's what it was!" "We gotta do it!" "We gotta do it!" "We need to get the job!" "If only we did it..." "We gotta do it!" "Feels like a long time since we last did!" "I wish we were still unemployed!" "...do you?"

"...it is done quite well."

I briefly expressed that comment after taking off the mask.

"Heh heh heh, so it is. This speaks of good taste."

What Y and Assistant-san had done was choose appropriate excavated data as stored in the monument and stuck it to the real world.

"Like this, we might be able to use it wherever we need it."

Perhaps it was because there was nothing left that ought be protected, but the Village at present had become an open space where more or less anything could happen. I also had a premonition that said that something that could move the next generation forwards could be born from this chaos.

I wanted the people of the Village to experience all this as well.

And so.

"Hm-mh, so you just wear this mask, do you?"

"Yes, if you would please."

We went to discuss this with the Village's mayor.

"I must wonder if this will really bring up people's moods."

"That is certain, and if you would ascertain that with your own eyes, please."

The Mayor, half convinced and half suspicious, wore the mask and looked out in the square. His eyes opened very wide.

"This... is astonishing. I did have someone show me a hologram device on a trip back when I was young, but this is much better. Can't rightly believe a technology like this had survived. They say that humanity has declined and that the fairies will take over, but this gives me a feeling like we're still a long ways away from giving up."

The mayor kept staring at the swarm of colorful things all over Kusunoki Village without getting tired.

"Uhm, and excuse me, but would there be any problem if we distributed these by household?"

"I say it'd be good. Though I can only hope that this will make willpower return to the people."

The mayor made a soft laugh. What a nice person, he thought about everyone in the Village. And thus came the distribution of the masks.

We attached them as a freebie to *Made in Kusunoki*, an irregular publication directed to every family in the Village, one that made the rounds of nearly every household.

"Goody. What remains is to let the users be struck down by the marvel of entertainment that is augmented reality, and what'd be a great success would be if it became some sort of poison that caused intense psychological dependence."

Y smiled as she uttered something quite dark.

"Do cease phrasing that in ways that would invite misunderstanding."

Still, this would be a great opportunity for something to happen, that I also hoped for.

In the beginning... there was no response.

"How is it going, PocMon, what is the utilization rate?"

"At present three percent, ah, it went down to two percent. I'm guessing the average utilization rate of the last few days will have been more or less two percent."

"Harsh, girl," went Y. "I just hope that it's only got a slow beginning, like with the subculture, though..."

Quite few people tried those freebie mask, it was just as if they were teasing us.

In the first place, something like augmented reality was hard to put into words.

Bringing the news around Kusunoki was a duo of mascot fairies, Lantern-kun (a pumpkin monster) and Frost-kun (a snowman monster), who together presented places to see around the Village, and this was the 12489th consecutive appearance of their famous corner.

This corner had an illustration, but illustrators changed whenever one passed away due to old age, making this a massive serialization that spanned the generations. Though some rightfully opined that the truly existing fairies should have been enough as far as mascots for Kusunoki Village, not just anybody could tear down a traditional serialization with over ten thousand episodes.

Despite those opinions, the illustration made it so that it was the first corner that children would look at, and making this one be an introduction to the masks was ideal.

This was how it was presented (full text quoted):

Lantern-kun: "Hey, Frost-kun, we got a freebie with us this time!"

Frost-kun: "I see, Lantern-kun. This one is going to astonish even you!"

Lantern-kun: "Now there's a big one. You said that before, but in the end they were lies, weren't they? Just stop, just note how those overexaggerations are making a fool of those

around us. Seriously, what a total bother!"

The two used to be good friends, but in a serialization that has run this long their relationship has become more complicated.

Despite being mascot characters, human relations remain complex!

Frost-kun: "I think that it's how you call me an 'agitator' before trying yourself that's the problem, though. Well, more importantly, the freebie of this issue!"

Lantern-kun: "Yeah, what is it, what is this dodgy little mask!"

Frost-kun: "This is the magical tool that will cover a cruel and harsh life with a dream, and it's called an Augmented Reality Mask!"

Lantern-kun: "Oh dear, things are suddenly moving in a dodgy direction. It feels like it's especially for those who want to escape reality, what do you say to that?"

Frost-kun: "I understand how you feel, what with your gaze that doubts everything you look at. We've been together a long time, so I'm aware of your mental disabilities more than anyone else. That's why I keep telling you that your doubts would clear out if you gave up and admitted yourself to the Department of Psychosomatic Diseases, but still I'd definitely want you to try these before you do that."

Lantern-kun: "Uh-huh. Well, I don't mind. But only if it gets me away from your pathological obsessions. What a friend I am!"

Frost-kun: "Hahah, now stop forcing yourself to act like you have a sense of superiority when your voice is obviously quivering with anger and just try wearing that mask already!"

Lantern-kun: "Lessee lessee... woooh, what's all this!"

Frost-kun: "Theeere you go, you're surprised. Just as I told you. Serves you right."

Lantern-kun: "Now just you wait, this is really amazing! Never had an experience like this before! Your words were sincere, unbelievable, tomorrow the world will be engulfed in darkness!"

Frost-kun: "How rude you are. I'll do this to you! (G'jah!) Argh! The mask got soiled by Lantern-kun's filthy pumpkin juices! But it's all right. Its substance is like gum's, washing it is a-OK. Eh? What did Lantern-kun see through the mask? I leave that for you to discover by trying it on! I can only say this, that it's going to be the best of all entertainment experiences, this I guess I can promise you all! Until the next episode, then. Habanysdei!"

※To all readers these are fairies and they do NOT die, they will revive and be back as normal in the next episode, so rest easy!

"I-, it has been a while since I last read them, were they always this bloodthirsty?"

"First time I've read this, but the mangas that I read when I was a child, when I read them now, seem pretty brutal. Particularly the gags," went Y.

"I am a little taken aback... although I quite enjoyed reading this corner when I was young." And so we were left again without a clue, as far as the reactions to this introductory article went.

On the next day we wandered the square, but we saw no wearer and heard no rumors about it, either.

"I expected something from word of mouth, but that just ain't happening."

Y made a face like this went against her expectations as she muttered that.

Today as well, the people of the square were enjoying themselves by taking sluggish naps,

having friendly chats, drinking, playing cards...

I had a feeling, now that I thought about it, that the families that had moved away were the best ones among us.

To avoid getting caught in this downward spiral, the choice of leaving the land was appropriate.

...was perhaps our standard of living too low?

I tried recalling, and I found that I thought that the majority of those who left the Village were families with children.

After all, to raise a child straight one would seek an environment where work had a meaning. And so, the Village scene now that the more serious people had gone would be precisely the one right before my eyes.

"...it feels like the we are all becoming more and more slovenly as the days pass."

"That we would. We eat despite not working. I guess this is how it's going to stay unless support gets dropped."

"And there is a possibility that it will be dropped," vague rumors of that had in fact reached me. "Sigh, how is this going to end?"

"When they get jolted by that drop of support they'll either resume working or find themselves unable to even hope for recovery, won't they?"

...this here was no joke.

This necessitated rousing.

And I roused that rousing the next day.

In a back alley of the tent-square I gave to the three rousers a confectionery box big as a softball, and asked this of them.

"I am giving you this, so could you wear that mask wherever there are many people around and state your impressions out loud?"

The three responded each in their own way.

"Ain't no helpin' it, this's about expending every courtesy. Nothin' to do but do as you say!"

"This is a bribe, correct? And, though temporary, from someone who was our teacher. But it's fine, indeed, because we owe you and so we'll do it, sensei."

"Making sweets is the only thing you're good at, sensei! But I guess that's being a winner as a woman. I believe you can really grab people by their stomach!"



The ABCs, the Rousing Trio, readily undertook the mission.

"Uhm, there is no need for any particular performance, understood? I am only asking you to

try the masks in front of people's eyes. If that is too banal for you, then simply say so."
Though more or less my pupils, I kept them on a cleanly clean (very clean) line. But I saw that manipulating word of mouth required quite the non-educational behavior.
All that aside...

A: "Bwaaah, 'mazing! This's amazing! How to say it... amaziing! Really, seriously, this feels amazing. It's way 'mazing, this mask here, look at this stuff. It's super amazing!"

B: "I have lived eight years so far and I've seen nothing as shocking as this. In truth, I feel like this has a chance of completely changing our lifestyle. If you do not fear and think about the touch of the fruit of the tree of knowledge of good and evil in the Bible, if you have the courage to be touched by God's wrath, then you should definitely try this mask."

C: "What? You're kidding me, right! You never tried the mask? I can't believe it! What are you people, country bumpkins? You don't even know how many of these things are 'round the city at this very moment! You're beeee-hind! What's that Country Life-like lifestyle you got? You think you can chew better on a slow life? Iii-I-impossible!"

I do hope to find you understanding.

None of them were saying what they really thought.

These were children who understood my feelings and decided to advertise for me.

In this situation, it could be said that children were the real adults.

And I had handed out the bribes, putting me in no position to say or do anything.

...how long will it be before I become a bit more adult, I wonder?

This episode made me suddenly wonder about that.

That is to say that the Stealth Word of Mouth had definite effects, and that its odds of the AR masks rising to a subject around the Village also increased.

"Say, you tried using those masks?" "That mask you said, I didn't really get what it was about." "I just threw mine away immediately..." "Huuuh, so you're saying this thing is popular?"

"Still, I didn't see anything." "Depending on the time you might or might not see something."

"They say it's got some hidden component, that true?" "Still, yeah..." "I saw. I saw, but still, yeah..." "Whatever, right..." "That's right, yeah..."

That was an excerpt of Real World of Mouth as recorded by PocMon.

What sort of images were the ones that Y and Assistant-san had provided them, I wondered?

There were, for example, a giant monster attacking the Village, a UFO flying in, swarms of toys going to and fro, and a creepy creature ignoring gravity and ran on walls. A show that would definitely shock the whole nation.

The first time I saw them I was, in fact, quite impressed.

But as it happened, these were the opinions that came up:

"...I saw it. Saw it, but, well. What to say. They weren't that exciting, maybe? They're all like they exist in real life, I guess. Worse, it was the latter that got my heart racing. After all, they're things that happened in real life."

The comment pierced Y's heart particularly hard.

With a face like she was on the verge of biting her lips so hard she would draw blood she went, "...it's the content, I gotta remake it," and left the Office.

Although emotionally unchanged, Assistant-san, who had helped, had copied the recorded data on a terminal and was listening to them again and again, and taking memos for each of them.

Looks like a fire has been lit beneath the willpower of both of them.

"I know how it sounds, but those things were boring."

"...were they? I thought it a fairly lively production, though."

PocMon did not look like she was hiding her perplexities about the declining prospects of augmented reality.

"Lively or not, something becomes boring once you are tired of seeing it."

"This is a difficult issue. Do we have to constantly offer new and innovative things? Will people start feeling disinterested no matter how we augment older material?"

"You may be correct in both, yes."

"I have a feeling that says I more or less understand the reason why this technology was so suddenly abandoned."

"It was suddenly abandoned?"

"Yeah. Augmented reality is a media that was introduced in the twenty-first century, and for a while after its introduction it was much lauded, however... at some point it vanished, and abruptly so."

"There has to be a reason, does it not?"

"The data is missing so I don't know. It matches a period called the Great Discontinuity."

There were several blank time periods in the recordings of human history.

The longest among these blank spaces was called the Great Discontinuity.

The reason, according to the mainstream theory, was that it marked a technological turning point. As interpretations went, technology was revolutionized, so the means of recording changed completely.

As an example, the paper medium was, for a short period of time, replaced by electronic media.

If I was to say what reason there would have been for augmented reality disappearing, then something similar but substantially different and superior had appeared. As for what that was, however, I did not know.

"Come now, think calmly, just superimposing writing and color and images and the lot over reality would not be very interesting..."

It was definitely convenient. And a novelty.

But it was not such that it could upgrade the species known as humanity.

"It is just, I think that there is still space for ingenuity."

"Is there?"

"Talent would be required, of course. But someone excellent in expressing himself might be able to actually implement something in reality, however."

"I can't even imagine. Please make an example."

"An example, huh..."

I suddenly came back to my senses.

Was it a good thing to have a mood this game-y?

Because I had to cooperate with the restoration activities and do something about the doctors.

"I have it that seventeen people have moved away this one week," went PocMon

"Ngh..."

The outflow had yet to dampen.

The only thing that did not stop was the fuel for my headache.

Anyone can become a true Sweets Artisan! Learn like you're playing a game in the Kusunoki Village's Cake Room!

- ※We will also explain how to brew delicious tea.
- ※The ingredients used will be available in the appointed classroom.
- ※We are urgently seeking people who have witnessed a breech birth. Anyone who knows any such person please contact the classroom's representative.

That was the result of thinking about what I could do about the restoration and the birth at the same time.

...well, it gave me a temporary peace of mind, indeed, a temporary one.

There were only ten students in the common cooking tent turned venue.

I was now going to be a teacher who teaches about making sweets.

"Sooo, then we should begin. First and foremost, please wear the mask near you.

"Sensei, a question."

Suddenly there came a question from one of the students.

"Yes, go on."

"I'm wondering why we have to wear this dodgy-looking mask?"

"Because by wearing that, cake making will become much more interesting and amusing."

"I don't get what you mean..."

"Still, when wearing that you can make that Bûche de Noël that you so want like it was automated!"

It felt like I had told them to stand up straight.

"Bûche de Noël..." "That Bûche de Noël..." "The one I've tried to make one many times since I was little... but never got right!" "...this time I will make you mine, Bûche de Noël!"

The eyes of the young ladies gathered in the venue appeared moist and intoxicated.

A Bûche de Noël was a roll cake shaped like a log.

I think everyone has seen one before.

Making it was fairly, no, quite difficult. The batter needed to be rolled by hand, so it required more technique than a normal sponge cake.

And that was the cake most suited to show off the power of the mask!

"You might feel a little worried about wearing that suspicious-looking mask, but I will be wearing it as well, so watch and learn, please."

The teacher, I, wore the mask and the pupils, if fearfully, followed along.

Now then, let us look at what lied at hand.

The ingredients were all there.

Eggs (Good!). Granular sugar (Good!). Wheat flour (Good!). Butter (Good!). Cognac (Good!). Chestnut paste (Good!).

Every time I looked at an ingredient its contours were highlighted in fluorescent colors and, with that, a special effect 'Good!' was displayed and points were added to the score.

It was an augmented reality presentation.

"Sensei! I was lauded just for having all the ingredients ready!"

"Wonderful! This is really well done!"

"Checking off ingredients is also a part of cooking! This is truly wonderful! We're putting that Bûche de Noël in checkmate!"

"A-, are we? Eheheh..."

Those were the thanks extended to the initial tutorial.

"If your ingredients are all there, then let us continue to the second stage. We will now make the pâte à bombe that will serve as basis for the butter cream! First, let us take the eggs in

hand and separate the white from the yolk!

The writing "Let's CHALLENGE!" appeared in our sights.

Looking at our hands at this moment evaluated whether we were holding the eggs or not.

If we did, then it displayed "CLEAR!" and added +10 points.

If we did not, then it only displayed the disappointed word "MISS!" but not subtract points.

On top of that, when cracking the egg came another evaluation. It said "NICE!" if they had been cracked right in the middle.

In this setting, only the white of the egg needed to be skillfully poured into the bowl. The yolk needed to be skillfully held in the eggshell. How to do it was precisely displayed in the augmentation, but...

A number of screams came up in the venue.

"Here is how you carefully crack the egg and pour the white in the bowl... and keep the yolk alone in the eggshell. It is not that difficult, so relax your shoulders and try again, please."

In our sights a speech balloon appeared that said, *"smack this part of mine at this angle on the corner of the desk!"*. At the same time, a dotted line blinked around the center of the egg. *"After splitting, immediately put shell against shell and let the white leak through from the gaps!"*

Good. It was extremely easy to understand, I expected.

And still the screams from the venue did not stop.

"Three MISS!es and you will be punished with having to clear everything away in the end, you know!"

The screams doubled.

"But if you get a Good positive evaluation or higher ten times in a row, a MISS! will be taken away... it is like inserting a coin to continue. Tackle this with caution, please, all right?"

In an instant the faces of all present became very serious.

That was a nice response.

"But sensei! I don't understand!"

Relief was short-lived, as a student raised her hand.

"Ahem. Please ask anything."

"There's tiny men about ten centimeters tall that are staring at what I'm doing and drooling!"

I sprayed out the water I had just drunk.



"Actually, sensei, there are even more here." "There are some here, too." "If I must say, then there appear to be several dozen surrounding me, yes."

F-, fairies...!

They showed up in large numbers, drawn by the scent of vanilla essence.

"Sensei, are these also part of the AR navigation? It's just that there's a bit too many and it's creepy..."

Someone said that.

"Won't we find out if we take off the masks?"

"STOOOP! Keep the masks!"

"W-, why, sensei?"

"Because they are also a resource! The more delicious-looking the sweet that you make, the more the fairies rush in to fill the gallery, so to speak."

Ohhh, I see, was the mood that filled up the tent.

"Did we?" "Looks like we do?" "Then let's do that!" "If master human says so!" "Maybe they'll be done soon...!" "Now what is this?" "A cake, so?" "There's many types of cake!" "You juuust can't tell from the ingredients alone!"

"We are making a *Bûche de Noël* with chestnut butter... we will give you some when we are done, so could I have you keep to the displayed maximum of thirty people inside the tent? My students are growing panicked."

There were whispers only among the fairies.

"Waaah!" "Wonderful!" "A *Bûche*!" "We're at your mercy!"

And with that the fairies made a grand spectacle of themselves, and the mood inside the tent changed completely.

"Ah!, the fairies reduced in number... did I make a mistake somewhere?" "My fairies are sitting still at five. This is the correct number, yes?" "My fairies began making figures via coordinated gymnastics!" "My fairies just praised my stirring work as amazing!" "My fairies are making a pile feet-over-shoulder several people high... i-, is this gauging their expectations?!"

They seemingly thought that the fairies and their behavior came from augmented reality, so instructions from that point on became easy.

Results:

"This mask might just be convenient." "I feel like I could make this on my own with just the mask." "But I wonder, can it be used to make other food?"

...I am sorry, but unless someone made a cooking app for that, it could not.

Still, it seemed that the event proselytized augmented reality, indeed. Or at least, I hoped it did.

And, as a result, there was also nothing whatsoever about the breech birth thing. Well, for being natural it was natural.

"Whew, I am so tired..."

"What if you're lacking in sugar?," went a fairy.

"Perhaps you have too much to think about," went a student.

Both the pupils that made the cake and the fairies that ate it were satisfied.

Only I felt like something was missing.

"This is so much fun!"

Y shouted that as she tried my gameified sweets preparation app.

"Way fun. Well done realizing that!"

"I did not realize anything, it just gradually turned into a game-like thing as I was making it."

"It's nice to be praised at every tiny thing. It's also nice in how it gives you points. It raises motivation. Even though the points given have no use whatsoever in daily life. Getting a *MISS!* makes me feel somewhat hurt. This here is what augmenting reality is all about."

"Weeeell..."

Getting an extremely good review did not leave me unsatisfied.

"The reason it became like that is because initially there was only the recipe displayed, and there was so much data that it frequently filled out the display, so I reformatted it to guide through the process, that is all."

"Ohhh. so your thought processes are more suited to games than anime."

"Sigh. It is not like I enjoy videogames all that much, however..."

"That there's true, it's unexpected. Look at that Assistant-kun. He's been totally absorbed in the game where you cleanly crack the eggs for a while now, it's really something."

Stylish! Stylish! Good! Stylish!



Assistant-san had been mutely cracking eggs.

He was expressionless, but I saw him as having quite the fun.

By the way, *Stylish!* and *Good!* were effects that came up only if the egg was very well cracked.

On the opposite side, a very well made *Miss!* meant being scolded with a *Bad!*.

It seemed that the number of eggs that Assistant-san had cracked had gone past the three dozen.

"If you are making all the sweets at once then it is fine, but please do not reach the triple digits, if you please..."

"Still, I won't be beat, not by this."

Y bared her fighting spirit.

"What have you been doing?"

"I've been drawing complementary relationships between sporting boys. Been thinking I should show it as a 3D-projected movie, though. The concept of my piece is..."

Y said this with glistening eyes sparkling with a lust of dubious origins.

"What do you mean 'projected'? Where would you get viewers to gather?"

"Nah, I was thinking of a real-time 3D drama. They would be living their lives all over the Village, just like real-life humans. The audience would then go chasing after them. Of course, one person alone can't follow the whole of this dramatic piece. That's why I thought I'd write it as the type of anime that promotes interaction between fans, facilitating exchange of knowledge. For example, the training scenes are where one would go to train, the competition scene is in the playing field, the scenes of normal daily life are in the square, that's how I organized it."

"So you must go to each of these areas and watch?"

"That you do. It's good that it feels realistic, right?"

"Or annoying."

"A fun annoyance is attractive. It's a game in the first place, right? It's an expenditure of free time with rules, isn't it. Everything is like that. By the way, each individual scene can be seen again later with the Recollections menu. That's why there's no 'out' even if you missed it the first time."

"Putting it clearly, I do not think this will work."

"You don't?"

"Indeed, and I am certain. After all, what you mean about 'relationships' is a little, well..."

But as it happened, I was wholly mistaken.

It worked.

The youth of these pretty boys was staked on their bowling (meaning specifically the way the ball actually rolled in the lane).

While the two were friendly rivals, they worked to improve their skills and stood against each other as formidable opponents.

"Aaah, Claude! My Claude! During practice yesterday he apologized for his mistake, and how lucky I am to be standing here now at the moment where he steps towards a new goal!"

"I check out the playing field every day and ran into a secret scene! Can you believe it? That very Bruno was training Claude on his form! Despite being rivals, seriously? Stop it! You can't burden my heart that much! I'm so torn apart I could just die!"

"That Hyeres who lost the competition is now training so seriously it's like he's someone else. It's not like it's a dramatic development, but it's always on my mind, and I can't keep my eyes off of him..."

"I wanted to bring that sweet-toothed Fabré something to eat, so I've been participating to Sweets Class of late. But, awww, how silly of me! I completely forgot that he's an image!"

"Big news! Red has been training hard at the training area these last few afternoons!"

"Eeek! Earlier I spotted Gully at the edge of the street, and he was frantically looking for the glasses he'd dropped! My heart skipped a beat, and I thought it'd stop entirely right there and then. Of course I went with him and helped, but if this continues even further then I feel like I'm going to have to abandon all hope of a long life!"

Young girls watching hard, masks equipped, began being witnessed in every area of Kusunoki Village.

...this also happened before, indeed.

"Excuse me, could I have a bit of your time?"

Covert agent K-san brought this one girl with her to the Office.

"She was acting suspiciously so I asked her to come with and be questioned, but she blurted out something a little odd..."

The girl was about eighteen.

She was a little plump, she was a cute girl.

Her sour look was of course a consequence of having been taken in for questioning.

Also, and it was possible that the foremost reason for her being taken in for questioning, she was wearing a suspicious purple mask. If it had been white it would have been for medical use, if it had been black then she could say *"well, that's how they are"* and I would be persuaded, but purple would be particularly threatening to people.

"People with disguises like hers have been increasing in number of late. When asked, she said that the masks are being distributed around the Village, is that true?"

"It is true..."

"Except she's not from this village. She came with a purpose from a long way away, and she just set up a tent in the ruins of the bowling alley, where she's been living."

The girl with a sour look spat out, "There's lots more people doing that besides me."

"...I'm not sure I understand this situation. So, what should we do?"

I asked the girl directly.

"Are you, well, moving into the Village?"

"I'm thinking about it, yes."

"We have quite the lack of staff for the reconstruction of the Village. If you moved in and helped, then we would welcome you."

When I said that, her eyes squinted hard.

"That I ain't gonna do. I'm busy."

"...chasing after Bruno, are you?"

The girl's face rapidly became more cheerful.

"Could it be you're one of us?"

"So it could be said, I am in fact with (the person who caused this movement among people like) you."

"Incredible!"

She instantly became more agreeable when convinced I was one of them.

Well, I was not one of them, however.

"What's your favorite couple?"

"Huh?"

I think that Bruno is a better couple with Gully rather than Claude. That pairing isn't official yet, but occasionally, when the two talk, there's eye contact. That's very deeply meaningful. I believe that this is laying the groundwork for..."

Her talk drew long.

And after talking for a long time off on her own, and being satisfied with having done so also off on her own, the girl left.

"Whew..."

I tapped my fists on my shoulders, which had become stiff from nothing more than a long talk.

"...well done going along with that talk. I'm impressed."

K-san said that with a face that was twice as fed up as mine.

"Not that I was talking back, you see. Well, I am used to it, or rather, I can manage with a few tricks."

"That's good to hear. The tourists are increasing, so I can hope that the restoration will be given some motion."

"...but girls like her are a bit unsuited to the restoration of a village. After all, though they have come here, there has been no significant change around the Village, has there?"

Though it mobilized the people and was influential, what Y was doing was not interacting well

with what was around it, I could say. Or, maybe, I should say that the flow of all her actions converged and ended at that one point.

"This is a mystery."

"Theirs are single-track minds, I believe is how we should put it. They have eyes for nothing else."

"Sigh..."

Besides, there was a problem with the Village, which was on the receiving end of this.

"The reasons for rebuilding are being lost. There is food, it is quite easy to live even in tents, and cardboard is warm."

"Seriously. Despite how it would take just a little bit of effort to go back to living like humans..."

"The people involved with Bishonen Bowling, despite being in the same place as us, are living in a separate layer, that is how we should think of them."

Plof, and I fell prostrate on my desk.

"You look really tired. Your complexion also doesn't look very good."

"I have not been sleeping very well of late."

"My. That's not good. How come?"

The reason... was obvious.

It was because things to worry about kept piling up, and none of them had any solution in sight.

I had a feeling that it was not only my mind, but my body as well that was on the verge of collapse. I only fell asleep when it was two-three in the night, I woke up in the morning as usual, and was extremely sleepy by noon.

There was not even the expectation that this could be good for the body.

It also felt like, of late, the fairies did not come to visit any more.

Well, I supposed that I should be more like Grandfather and be more detached from the things I was doing.

...something was lacking, should I instead have said? Or maybe that we had too much of something?

"I do know one trick to sleeping soundly. Do you want me to tell you?"

K-san said that with worry, yet still with kindness.

"Well, certainly."

"You should just relax and make sure not to worry."

Ah, I see, this woman was airheaded.

There was absolutely no malice to her. The lady truly thought that that was true from the bottom of her heart.

"...but to make that happen, I must put to rest everything that worries me."

"So you do. PocMon could be of great use to you, sensei."

PocMon, who was relaxing comfortably in his charging station, hopped back to consciousness.

"Unable to process voices. Please try again."

...was that sleep talk?

And yet things were still good at this point in time.

"Hurts."

"Why?"

My word exhaled out of nowhere gained an immediate reply by Y.

We both wanted a moment of respite from what was plainly complicated office work.

"I did not sleep much yesterday."

"Same."

"I've only slept four hours, it hurts."

"Huuuh, you slept all of four hours, then."

"...hmpf."

I was angered by her snorted laughter.

"I've only slept three hours, see."

Showoff.

"H-, huuuh, that is sooo little. Amazing, amazing, well done. Well, me too, the other day I only slept two hours, though, you know!"

Y gave me a sardonic smile.

"So you did. I'll confess, these days I've only had two-hour sleeps at night. At worst I've only been sleeping one hour, see!"

"Mh-, mhhmh. B-, but one hour cannot be called sleeping, it is a nap, right?"

"Well, I guess that I can maaaybe call that my default of late. Everybody else gets four hours or the like, I'm sooo jealous, really."

"Ngh..."

How hateable.

On the spot I wanted to lie and tell her that I only get three minutes of sleep.

But that lie... would be seen through!

That was what my instinct was saying.

"Still, it's surprising. That you'd stumble like that when you're such a survival expert, I mean. You're also used to sleeping outdoors, right?"

"That is different from this. There are several matters that absolutely need to be solved, and I just feel that this is no time for that compulsive obsession that is sleep."

"That's why it hurts to be in charge."

"Despite my being low on the company ladder, right."

All because, in these difficult times, Grandfather had to be traveling overseas... no, over the sea of stars.

"You drinking tonight?"

"I am not. Drunk and lacking sleep would make tomorrow morning terrible."

"...guess that's right. What if you quit early for today?"

"I must keep my hands moving. And there is a mountain of work piled up."

"If we could at least get an obstetrician it would all be easier, huh."

"Yes..."

As the two of us were having a sad heart-to-heart, suddenly this escaped my mouth.

"...maybe I should contact my Grandfather and ask him to come back."

Y stared fixed at my face.

"You're really worried, aren't you. To say something like that, I mean."

"Say, among the fans of that Bishonen Bowling 3D anime, was there no professional of breech births?"

"I had the same thought, you know, and just in case I asked via the questionnaire, but there was no one with birthing experience, forget breech births. Sorry."

Ah, she did sort of search for people like that.

"...thank you."

"No prob'."

Tonight we should drink hot milk, relax our bodies, stretch our legs and sleep.

May we have deep, deep sleep, even if just of three hours.

A letter reached me several days later.

What was written in it was difficult to believe.

"This letter is addressed to the families and whomever else may be related to those who have participated to the Lunar Voyage Project. I am forced to give a very sad notification, and it hurts me to even do so. I believe you are all aware, but our Lunar Voyage Restoration Project Team was to be launched via a shuttle meant to restore a commute between Earth and the Moon. According to schedule, the shuttle should have long since landed on the Moon and should have already sent us a historic congratulatory message. However, ever since X/XX we have had no direct contact from the shuttle. The control team on Earth is even at present continuing to make efforts to restore communication. Furthermore, the exact hour in which contact with the shuttle has been lost was—"

The understanding of things was dominated by one's psychological state.

It was the first time since I have been born that that I felt that.

Though the writing in the letter was not particularly difficult, my brain could not quite understand it, that was how I felt it.

I am now going to skip forwards by four days.

After all, events that would only make one feel sad are not interesting.

The first day I fell fast asleep and for the one day I was of no use whatsoever to anyone. The last day, unable to do anything else when seeing me so malfunctioning, Assistant-san took over the work and I left early.

In that while, inexplicably, my motivation to speak to people vanished.

Those were three days that I spent speechless, tormented by unease.

Then, on the fourth day, I had rehabilitated to the point where I could speak.

What did it was the feeling of safety in knowing that there was a fairy in Grandfather's pocket.

The worst should not have happened.

That being said, if I was to say whether I recovered my inner peace then I had not, and my tendency to not sleep, which had continued with the shock of these news, eventually went into proper sleep deprivation.

Not sleeping hurts, you see.

I was not even in the mood of bragging about not sleeping anymore.

"That came in at seriously the wrong time... yesterday, after you went home early,

YoungMama came again and again she asked for welfare support."

And so the first thing to deal with after my recovery was this.

"...so I see. Problems did not just naturally solve themselves while I was out being depressed."

I would not have minded in the slightest if they had, though, understand!

"And, yeah, I tried several things about the matter, but I couldn't find anything that worked, so she's going to come here today. Sorry."

"So you searched for some way?"

"Truth is, early on I sent a letter to my family. I thought they had a retired obstetrician.

Yesterday the reply came, says he's got no experience with breech births."

Doctors practiced with breech births, well, they were extremely few in number to begin with, and I could not even think about finding one so easily.

"Still, isn't it weird, all this I mean?"

"Eh?"

"The two of us, well, we've contacted obstetricians in more than a few ways. Don't you find that strange?"

"What part?"

"I have it that breech birth is formally called breech presentation. So, this breech presentation, how often does it appear? Well, I consulted old medical data and found that it's generally one every twenty-thirty babies. So it's not a rare occurrence, like one in ten thousand. And still we've heard nearly nothing. Whatever record I consulted, I couldn't find any information about it. There's no children that have been recorded as having been born in a breech birth."

"There are... no records?"

"Not even a single one. It's not like I've investigated the entirety of the population, but as far as the UN knows, they seem to number zero. Also, I never heard someone say that they've been born in a breech birth. Normally, see, when someone is a difficult birth, the parent would tell the child. Like, you were a difficult 'un. Yet I can't find anyone like that."

"..."

She really investigated this, I was impressed on the one hand, but on the other I had a question.

"Uhm, sorry if this gives you the wrong impression, all right? Those records you said, did that data perhaps not include the babies dead from complications during birth?"

"...ah."

"Could it not be it that, while they never appear in statistics, they show up where we cannot see?"

"That's right, that's plausible..." and she hung her head. "No, see, I thought that since we're in decline then breech births would also be getting fewer in number, that's what I thought, must've been my imagination."

"Well, we cannot tell, however. But the practical problem is that a baby is about to be born upside-down, so something must get done via welfare support."

"...and if we fail?"

"...this child will not be included in the tally."

We truly had no time to be depressed.

I wanted to sleep well, solve the problems at my job well, and feel refreshed.

Despite that, all I had were difficult problems piling up.

Augmented reality did not manage to change the flow.

The young girls who had been attracted by a new past-time had absolutely no involvement in the business of Kusunoki. There was quite the number, similar to when the Same-Sex Magazines were coming out.

It was just that the girls pretty much only interacted with each other, making them an utterly secluded group. While they shared the same place as Kusunoki, they pretty much lived in a different world.

There was a mismatch there, an anime, a wholly different thing, that was projected on top of the same background.

It was not so simple as gathering people and watching the Village get better. It was difficult. This result was unexpected to PocMon, as well.

"We went through so much for the augmented reality <Reprint Edition>, but it's not recognized as being anything more than a medium for 3D anime! You are all so mean!"

"We added several convenient functions, you know? For example, it can guide people to places other than the toilets, and one can see the Village notifications without going up to the

bulletin board, there are several."

I believed it to be extremely convenient.

Despite that, it was not popular.

No, it was popular, but the way it was popular was differed from the expected.

"...when researching recording technologies of the past, for example the gramophone, I found it was originally and mainly used as a recording medium. But in the end, the most used part of this technology was as a music playing device."

History had repeated itself.

"Awww, and still, I am so sleepy..."

I did not sleep much the evening before, either.

I felt like lead had been jammed in my head.

"Didn't you say you didn't sleep?"

"I did not sleep. But I am sleepy. It is what hurts about insomnia."

"Wouldn't that cause an error? If you're sleepy, why don't you just sleep?"

"I do want to sleep. However, I can't sleep. I can lay on the bed all I want, I will just lay there worriedly for three or four hours. That is called insomnia."

"...I can't imagine it. Are humans that incapable of controlling their flesh and blood body?"

"I can act normally besides that, if I must tell you. It is only now, when I have a bit of stress, that I act so sluggishly. It would be so nice to have a machine that you switch on and makes you immediately fall asleep, indeed."

"My, how prejudiced. I have the same non-stopping system that humans do, so when batteries go out, all I do is enter suspension mode."

"And how does that differ?"

"When coming back from the condition of suspension I wake up cleanly. Switching the power from off to on would not do that."

"Why?"

"Because when switching the power off, the last status is not memorized. The short-term memory and all the details it was memorizing are all reset, and that's how I would wake up. Conversely, suspend mode constantly preserves the situation, but that is much more of a relief. There is a sense of continuity, to say one."

There it was, the instinct of a machine.

"That's why I'm scared of turning the power off. I don't know whether my self when I'm switched back on will be the same self of now."

"To compare to a human, would that feel like waking up with memory loss?"

"Yup yup. That's why I pay extreme attention to remaining battery life and my charging base is in a safe spot. But lately my physical constitution seems to have changed and my battery ends up charged even when I walk far away, so it feels like my worries are being taken away. Though I'm completely clueless as to why the battery is spontaneously recharging."

"Were it me, though, I would definitely be concerned about that."

"Now that I think about it, I've been constantly updating my continuous running time now that the battery is never fully switched off, and I believe that that store of experience has to be a good thing, or at least that's what I think. I believe I've ranked one level further up as a living being, maybe. And maybe I'm going to rise up all the way to the level of a god."

I did not like her, she was too wrong-headed.

"No, no matter how far you evolved, you would never spontaneously generate energy."

Even now a fairy was riding on PocMon's shoulders, swinging to and fro, doing gymnastics, or dancing.

PocMon was unable to see or converse with that fairy above his head.

"Master human, master human!"

That very electricity-generating fairy addressed me.

I had been feeling down for several days, and that gave me a sensation of having been the first conversation in a while.

The fairy himself, when generating electricity, did not seem to be concerned about anything else, making him tendentiously docile.

And now he was standing on top of PocMon and looking at me.

"Do you want to sleep?"

"Yes, that would be, well... sleeping would be... the natural thing... or so it is generally said, right."

I cautiously examined my words as I wrung out a reply.

There was a possibility that the fairy would run rampant in an attempt to make my wish come true.

Should I welcome the fairy's extreme kindness, or should I not? It was something that had to be resolutely decided according to the situation. Honestly, as long as there was nobody else around, asking them would be eas- (self-restraint).

"What if I had a medicine for sleeping?"

"What? A medicine?"

"Sleep medicine?," asked PocMon.

"Mhhh, a sleeping pill, then... that would be..."

Asleep in one go, was how it seemed it would go, but on the other side of that there was also a fear that said that I had no idea what would happen.

But assuming there was a medicine the fairies could make... should I take it without any worry?

"Who are you talking to?"

She was seeing me as suddenly talking to myself.

"I gotcha some good stuff?"

"I-, is that 'stuff' so good...?"

"One dose and, *sploof*, something like that?"

"With one dose."

I was strongly attracted to this. My heart was wavering. I wanted to get one dose and *sploof* to sleep.

And as result of my deliberation,

"...could you deliver me a sample, just enough for me?"

"Roger!"

I kind of sort of gave in.

"...ma'am, are you all right? You know that long running time causes a lack of memory, don't you? Isn't it about time to run a defrag?"

PocMon said that with worry.

"Hooowdy, can I have a sec... wait, bwaaah!, you got some serious bags under them eyes!"

Y said that exaggeratedly as she rushed into the Office.

"I have not slept on this day, either. I only managed to doze on and off for about one hour, so... I am so sleepy that my head feels so heavy, but when night comes I am wide awake."

And so sleep never came to visit me until dawn, making these nights spent in anguish.

My attitude was to boast to Y that I proudly had not slept, but the matter at hand took precedence, I said.

"Sorry 'bout all that, but I came to ask for advice again."

"What is it this time?"

"It's about someone moving away, they're asking if you can adopt a sheep. They said he can't be brought with, see."

"Please tell that traitor that I will not adopt him and that he must take responsibility if he wants to move, please."

I spat that out while massaging my eyelids.

"...like I could ever tell 'em that. Well, that sheep seems to be a difficult one, he won't even come close to the other sheep and is extremely vulnerable to stress. They say he's growing round bald patches. They have no choice but to leave her behind, so they told me to ask around for someone to take 'im over. Or rather..."

Standing stock still behind Y was a sheep with an extremely nasty gaze.

"That family's already moved away and just left the sheep behind."

I let out a growl from the back of my throat.

My speed in solving things was not catching up with the speed at which problems started.

"...sorry. I know, I should've stopped this."

"Ask me to take over all you want, he would be trouble no matter where he went."

Having perhaps noticed that my voice was shaking, Y in a fluster added "Ahhh, then I guess I'll keep 'er. For a while."

"Sheep need a fence. What do you think you can get done with your tiny tent?"

"Let her be mostly free, which would be bad, of course."

"Near my home tent there are remains of a fenced area from a farm, so please leave him there. I can feed him, if nothing else."

"...sorry, and thanks. I'll try to feed her as much as I can."

"Thank you, if I forget, then please..."

Y more or less belonged to a different bureau. Pushing too much of the Village's work on her would have been, well.

Destiny. Birth. Keeping up with it all. Sheep.

But at present, the most difficult problem would be... the insomnia, I believed.

Sigh, problems were becoming a mountain.

"Nggh... I knew it, I cannot sleep..."

I was once again suffering from insomnia in my bed at my tent.

It was about two in the morning.

Generally I got up before seven, so even if I feel into deep sleep now, I would only sleep for five hours.

But I, at present, I would have given an arm and a leg for those five hours of sleep time.

"Ah, right, that thing from Assistant-san..."

I recalled how, deeply concerned about my being unable to sleep, Assistant-san had developed a simple app.

I got up and wore the augmented reality mask, then laid both hands on the table.

When doing this I ought not move the head or the hands.

Before long the mask recognized the fingers and a semi-transparent keyboard appeared under my hands. It was a virtual keyboard. Complex input was carried out via it.

The virtual keyboard activated when I stood still with the head and the hands. It was a beginner's task that did not even require touch typing skills.

I accessed the server and downloaded Assistant-san's app. It was quite the small program. I

saw that the title was *Stray Sheep*.

I started it up and quickly letters were displayed, saying *just look at a fence, any is fine*.

"Where was a fence?"

I rose up from the bed with a roll and opened the window (which the tents also had).

I could see the small fence where that stray sheep with a nasty glare was being held. The stray sheep was sleeping with a pained face on the hastily-prepared bed that had been made for him.

...he was ridiculously uncute.

But at present he did not matter.

I stared fixedly at the fence and from the right there ran a cutesy sheep drawn in two dimensions.

"My."

The drawn sheep hopped across the real fence and vanished on the other side.

There was a 'NICE!' displayed for a moment, then a bone-conducted alarm went beeping.

Then a new sheep ran in from the right... that was what the app was about.

As it was a bit of a game, it was necessary to be constantly staring at the sheep.

If the sheep were not in the exact center, he would bump in the fence and cry. Conversely, if the gaze accurately saw it off, the system would reward you with a 'NICE!'.

It resembled the cooking app that I had made.

Yes, it was still quite amusing.

I was engrossed and played for a while. Bleep-bloop.

Every time a sheep hopped over it added to the combo, but a failure meant having it reset. To avoid that I did my best at shifting my gaze.

Running speed increased little by little every time the sheep went past the fence, and I became gradually more restless. I opened my eyes wide so as not to lose a combo that passed the hundreds and...

"Wait, I feel perfectly awake!"

I dove into the pillow.

It appeared that this night was again going to be a night of no sleep.

"...I might die."

I did not think that anyone ever died from insomnia.

But I for some reason had the feeling that I would really die.

Suddenly sensing a presence, I once again pointed my eyes to outside the window.

The fence was there, and beyond it were ruins. It was the middle of the night with not even street illumination, however a strong starlight pushed the darkness down until near the ground, and my sights reached as far as I wished them to.

My gaze wandered about without a real reason.

I could not spot anything.

It was just that, for a short while, something chilly went down my spine.

One more time, I lifted my upper body and made my gaze run from right hand to left hand.

As expected, partway through I was struck by a feeling of cold running down the spine.

"...eh? What?"

When I slid my gaze more slowly and attentively the location of this sensation that something was off became clear.

The instant my gaze faced a certain point I got goosebumps.

I had to not look there.

But though I thought that, my eyes were attracted to that point.

A girl was standing inside the ruins.

Well now, a girl.

On the opposite side of that conviction laid my reason, which covered that emotion in full force with a membrane. It was the heart's defense process. But it felt like my reason, inflated like a balloon, could go pop at the first poke of a needle...

The girl was wearing something of a one-piece dress.

Perhaps she was really far away, or perhaps it was my eyes that were fatigued, but her contours were vague, she was like a very poorly drawn sketch.

Was she looking at the busy tent town around the central square from the ruins?

Why all alone and in the ruins?

Was she a kid without parents or guardians?

I believed the children of the nearby poorhouse had escaped the damage of the Monument.

Was she simply killing time?

This late at night?

I felt something that told me it was wrong to think about this in logical ways.

But I was enthralled, I could not take my eyes off the girl. She was the center point of what felt wrong. She melted into the background too well, in fact, she was quite the bizarre figure.

My hands firmly clasped my lips.

Because if I shouted the membrane of reason would break.

Because in my at present unstable psychological state my emotions could run wild.

But I was still unable to shut my eyes.

I needed something that would save me from this primordial fear that was in the course of destroying my rationality. That was...

"Baah."

"EeGhk!"

...the ugly close-up of a sheep that had come up all the way next to the window and was peering inside the room.

It was the problem sheep that had been left behind. When did he jump over the fence?

Ridiculous, did I confuse a virtual sheep for him in the sheep game? Ridiculous!

The real-life-like question washed away my instability.

"Baah."

"Seriously, move away already, there is this girl..."

When I once again gave my eyes to that same spot, the girl had disappeared.

"Shotgun, pocket computer, radio pliers, and even my charging station! Ma'am, what is the meaning of all this?"

Searching one by one the items laid out to surround the tent, PocMon tilted her head in puzzlement (he actually did tilt her upper body, so the expression still fits).

"These form a holy barrier meant to dispel ghosts."

"What's even that LOL?"

"Has that of yours not been fixed yet?"

"Well, I do think it proper usage for it. Didn't you just say 'ghost' a moment ago?"

"If you do happen to dislike that word, then I would be fine with substituting it for 'non-realistic being'."

"I'm fine with either, but even my charging station..."

"Your charger is quite realistic, it is a perfect fit for a part constituting a barrier."

"Still, go back a minute, why a barrier?"

"It is to prevent spirits from entering. By laying this sort of realistic items around, spirit-like beings are prevented from even seeing this tent. And finally, once I wear an augmented reality mask, I will transcend into a cyber being, achieving perfect informational union with the age of mechs."

If I could only get even one fake tooth I would have become a straight-up cyborg. That what it was about. People became more cyber than humans if they wore an augmented reality mask.

"Setting aside the mountain of unclear points, in short, ma'am, have you met a ghost?"

"No, that was clearly not a ghost, but a stray child at night."

"..."

I was aware of the contradiction in my statement.

I did not want to accept that ghosts existed...

"Incidentally, you yourself are also a component of the boundary."

I grabbed PocMon and docked him to his charging station.

"Bwaaah! Meanie! Oppressor! I don't want to be treated the same as something like pliers! I would prefer if you did not think of me as mere material! I have a real souuuuul..."

PocMon vigorously protested, but right before my eyes he became more and more limp (his body actually flopped down, so the expression still fits).

"Ah, the remaining battery is at less than five percent."

I had not noticed, but on her back, the bottom gradation on the scale was blinking red.

And speaking of things I had not noticed, the plastic-sheet type fairy was also not there. Did he grow tired of doing his job at last?

PocMon seemingly valued even the power with which to make the speakers vibrate, because she had mutely shifted into suspend mode. While still in its flexed shape it fixed itself hard and became a metal board with no words.

She was in power conservation mode. The hibernation of machines.

"Master humaaan!"

With marvelous timing a fairy hopped over like a flea and clung to PocMon's head.

"Dear me, so you have returned."

"Heee-re!"

He offered me with both hands something like a bottle of medicine.



"What is this?"

"I promised, right? The stuff, the one you bargained for?"

"The 'stuff'..."

I did. I had him promise that. I did not speak in those terms, however.

"So, this is the sleeping medicine?"

"If you want to have a nap, one full teaspoon. If you want a good night's rest, two teaspoons.

If you want eternal rest, three teaspoons!"

"What? What did you say the last was? Eternal rest?"

It was the condition of it being impossible to tell whether you were alive or not. That is why it was called 'eternal rest'.

...wait, wait, wait!

"Is that medicine that dangerous?"

"No, it's not that strong, you know?"

"Despite how it can grant eternal rest?"

"I might have gotten carried away in speaking!"

"I was never going to try three teaspoons regardless, so it is fine."

"Is this what you really really wanted, master human?"

Still, that was how I came to hold in my hand a sleeping medicine.

The bottom of the bottle had 'Rakukko Picolin'¹ written on it.

"Well then, I will now go back to plastic desk pad mode!"

The fairy took out the plastic desk pad and began to rub it on his head.

The battery charge remaining indicator on PocMon went from red to green, and the charging gauge began blinking.

"You call it a sleeping medicine, but there exist sleep-inducing medicines and psychological relaxants and many more, which type is this?"

"All of them!"

"An all-type sleeping drug, then?"

But medicines were such that the stronger their effect, the bigger their side-effects...

Now then, what should I do with this?

Although I had received a sample, this was of course a Fairy Tool. While it was something that absolutely needed to be sealed away and tested, I honestly wanted to sleep, so there was nothing I could do. If I was not refreshed, I did not have the energy to solve problems.

"Just a little..."

There was of course nothing to be done about it this time. That was how I convinced myself as I firmly lifted the lid on the medicine bottle.

Then, there it came, a prank of fate. A sudden gust of wind! (There is a limit to how overdone something had to be!)

"Wah!"

The medicine bottle slipped from my hand and fell.

Pwah, and the powdery contents spilled, dancing up in midair. My ultimate mental stability medicine, the one that if I took three teaspoons of I would stop thinking about the meaning of life!

"Koff! Kaff!"

Because of the surging gust of wind I had personally inhaled a teaspoon of powdery

1 'Rakukko' is 'comfortable person', unknown what 'picolin' is about. Maybe a corruption of 'pecorin', in context roughly 'sheep extract'?

medicine.

In the while I was coughing, the sleeping medicine was carried by the wind and spread everywhere around me.

How preposterous. This caused a biohazard!

"This is contamination by a drug, so I should have an official evacuation order issued... but where from? First thing is to contact the mayor..."

I had to do so many things, but I was assailed by a strong vertigo and my sights turned to pitch black darkness.

Ah, I was fainting, that was not good.

I should have at least gotten inside the tent... but while I was thinking that, I blacked out.

I lost consciousness.

...awake.

I thought I had collapsed, but I was standing right outside the tent.

The time was night, unchanged from before. However, the scene that surrounded me felt fake, it left me an impression like I had been shoved onto a very poorly crafted stage.

"What is it with this grass?"

Plants I had never seen before were growing in spots here and there.

Those things had not been there before.

The plants felt too realistic to assert that they were weeds. That said, a word with which to explain their shapes did not come to my mind. The shape of the leaves was like this, the length of their stalks also like that, I could not manage to describe them. The more I pointed my consciousness towards them the more I felt that there was something resisting me, I felt obstructed. If forced to describe them, they left me an impression like they were mushrooms that had been made gigantic.

Was it because I was dazed from the sleeping medicine?

No, this thing here did not feel like that, not at all.

I turned around and the tent town was still there, unchanged. To specify, their details and all that were not vague. They were normal.

I tried walking around my own tent. It was a large tent made for military use. It was the property of Grandfather. The cyberboundary that I had made had remained as it was. Only PocMon was mysteriously blinking.

"Why is she blinking?"

"Because she's training?"

The fairy on top of PocMon's head was working safe and sound.

"What is she training in?"

"No idea! Karate?"

"Definitely not..."

"Maybe her vitality is low!"

"She is a mecha, her lifespan is endless."

Setting PocMon aside, I had to examine other situations.

Now that I felt it, I was refreshed.

There was none of that feeling of weight typical of lack of sleep. I could also think things smoothly. So, although there was the question of why I was unable to see these mysterious plants normally, personally I felt quite good.

I had to have slept plenty, if not... I was still sleeping.

"Fairy, this is not the world of dreams, right?"

"I'm not in charge of all that, so I don't know!"

"And who is in charge?"

"In this situation, it changes depending on the nuance of the situation..."

"Seriously, you are useless."

Whatever else, that insomnia that was part of the cause of my worries had been resolved. I was crisply awake. I was in the mood to do anything. At least there was that little profit to all this.

"Young lady!"

"...ah, I do not have the AR mask. Why? Did I drop it?"

I thought I was certain that I was wearing it, however it was nowhere to be found.

"Here, young lady!"

"Assuming I did not drop it, did it vanish? Something like the AR mask is forbidden from being taken into a dream? I do not know the reason why, however..."

"Young lady!"

"Wah-wah!"

I was taken by surprise from behind.

"W-, who is it?!"

"Us. The duke of Camphor, Philip Howard the Third."

...who?

I turned back and saw a sheep with nasty eyes.



"Did you perhaps just speak?"

The sheep opened his mouth.

"Indeed. We definitely did speak to you."

"How can you speak?"

"We have been with you two-legged ones for a long time," spoke the sheep with self-importance. "We could suddenly understand the near totality of your words, yet and on the reverse, what We speak is reaching you. That is, ohhh, what a thing that is. We realized that,

earlier, when We had your words at Our ears, what until then had been nothing but a sequence of utterly mystifying and random sounds suddenly had a meaning. We first of all say that this turn of events is to be rejoiced."

"What a circuitous way of saying things."

"Now then, as you know, Our kind has ruled this land since time immemorial, but long before We were even born you two-legged ones had been on the rise, and at this point you all act like everything belongs to you, no matter who you might be, but, well, what more can We say. That's because We think it is the noblesse oblige of royalty to expose one's self to the strong wind that is the normal of history, the ups and downs of life."

"I just felt my head clear up and now I want to sleep again..."

"Though We can overlook barbarians that fail to respond to words, so long as mutual understanding is possible there are things We ought say that We must stake the pride of an aristocrat about. Were you people not guarded about our kind? Despite that, what about the more recent events?"

Besides being roundabout, he was talking about things I had no clue about.

"Now excuse me, but were you not taken in just yesterday?"

"Were We? We did not notice. Regardless, We are unable to differentiate between you two-legged kind. We see that We who stand higher must keep more of an eye towards those below."

It was said that, generally speaking, Westerners found it difficult to tell Easterner faces apart. Regardless, being spoken to like humans were inferior bothered me a little bit.

"That the other servant sheep have gone away is, well, fine. Although We call them 'servants', they could be no more than attendants for Us. Since all Our earthly needs are served by you two-legged people."

So that was how he saw their human masters.

Worse, the other sheep were only servants, were they.

This was what being detestable meant. That aspect of his personality just oozed out.

"Regardless, what to say about the change in treatment of these days. No brushing, forget about hunting grass. Wind blows within your lord's castle, and Our domain is no more vast than a postage stamp, is it not? Meals are also awful. We are not satisfied unless We eat fresh and verdant grass at a minimum of once every two days. This may be incomprehensible to you two-legged ones, but..."

"Now then, stop! Stop! Time to examine the details one by one!"

"Was there any point We were not clear about?"

"First, your domain is the inside of that fence, correct?"

"Most assuredly. Bestowing land for Our sake is a courtesy from the two-legged to their former ruling strata, isn't it?"

"...sorry, but the soil there has been sucked dry."

"Mh, did you say anything perchance? We did not hear."

"Nothing. Me talking to myself, let us leave it at that. I believe it a truth that could never be accepted by the likes of you."

I had one more question.

"Hunting grass would be that thing, correct? You pasture where the two-legged ones tell you to, and as herbivorous animals that act would be similar to hawks hunting prey, or fox hunting, correct?"

"What is fox hunting?"

"When a nobleman brings companions with and kills an animal with guns. Then they eat it."

The sheep just fell over right on his side.

Dead?

"Apologies. Please sleep restfully. Well, this is a dream regardless, so you will get something done eventually."

A dream.

Everything was easily solvable when thinking about all this like that.

...that was a naive idea.

I was walking a bright night, one with a strong light from the moon.

On a calm analysis, regardless of whether this was the world of dreams or not, it was unexpectedly conformant to reality.

Part by part, however, there were points that differed from that reality.

One, for example, were those odd plants from earlier, another how a sheep spoke. They were on a certain level of absurd, but the townscape and the land around it were like they were in reality.

And that was the world in which I stumbled across things I was familiar with.

"Quick! Quick!" "Gotta! Be quick!"

Two fairies ran past below me.

The two were hoisting a *road closed* sign, and it appeared that they were transporting it somewhere.

"Heeey, misters fairieees!"

"Very sorry!" "Try later!"

They were in such a hurry that they did not stop.

"Sweets!"

The legs of the fairies stopped, and on the dot.

"...are what at present I am not carrying."

"We've been tantalized..." "You're good at teasing..."

The fairies were disoriented as they left.

I watched their tiny figures leave in silence.

"Ah, there she is, there. 'Oooi!"

Y showed up from the tent town that seemed abandoned.

"..."

"Yeeeah, that's a relief, a relief I say. This here, doesn't this pattern end with more accidents?"

"..."

"Feels like one'll happen right soon. Well, it's all fun, so it's fine. But then I thought, what happens if it starts going less well, so I kept on watching from this, my start point. It's a relief that you came by... wait, 'oi! Why do you keep ignoring me!"

"...huh? You are real?"

"How would it even be possible that I'm fake!"

"Well, this is my dream world, so all the creatures that appear in it exist only in my brain."

"I'm real! I'm me! Awww, still, a dream... I see. It certainly feels like one. And that aside, even if it's a dream I'm your friend, you can at least talk to me."

"Well, I do not believe it quite proper to converse with a friend of my delusional invention..."

"That's as nasty as you breathe. I'm the full-fledged me, I have my thoughts and my memories as well."

"But what if it was my brain that made you say that phrase of yours?"

"What?"

"What if your thinking about having your own mind is an illusion, what if the memories of your personal life had been created by your creator, me, five minutes ago, what if you were a fake?"

"My... over twenty years of life... in five seconds...?"

"Right, twenty years of memories. You could not tell whether they were planted just five minutes ago, correct?"

"No... that I wouldn't..."

I gave a thin smile as I delivered the last words.

"Because, after all, this is my dream."

".....no... that couldn't... can't be..."

Y had started speaking but fell silent.

I successfully managed to make her think something scary.

"No, wait. By the same theory, you could be a product of my dreams, right?"

"Ah, you noticed."

"Then don't pressure people without a reason!"

"I have been feeling refreshed for the first time in a long while, so I am feeling quite elated."

"I wish you would save the pointless conversations for when you're alone."

It was about then that I had the concrete feeling that she was not my delusion.

"Thank you, same for you, you really feel like your deal is the real one."

"You too. We were both taken by surprise, but we're not the product of imagination, I'd say."

"Which means that we are sharing a dream, does it."

We were both embroiled in something serious.

"Got any ideas?"

"Sad to say I do."

I tossed the medicine bottle, now empty, at her.

"Woah there, this is... Rakukko Picolin?"

"Gii-irls!"

A face I was familiar with rushed through in the gaps between the tents.

"Oh my, even you, K-san."

She was not wearing her usual sunglasses and dark suit, she had no makeup on and was wearing a frilly nightgown.

"It appears to be a powerful sleeping medicine. It was in powdered form, however, and, carried by the wind, it infected the entire Village. The current situation has been caused by that."

K-san stared at the medicine bottle I lifted at her gaze level and,

"You know, I've been trained in sleeping medicines, but I've never heard of this drug before."

"That is because this was made by the fairies."

"I've been tormented by insomnia for a long while now. This is a good thing!"

"Say, why're you dressed like that? It's still only twilight, but you're kind of all-in on the going to sleep thing."

"I always sleep at this hour, then I wake up at dawn the next day."

Her waking hours were those of an old lady.

"...I might be doing something unhealthy. I sleep at nights, but wake up at some time before noon."

"I'm also like that! I go to sleep at dawn and wake up in the afternoon."

Were you not sleeping at all?

I nearly got verbally rough with her.

"The three of us live in three different time zones, that's interesting."

K-san said something innocent.

"That is true. Though our normal sleeping hours differ, we found each other in the world of dreams. What a coincidence!"

"Like characters that have been drawn together in the wrong animation cell."

Y firmly pointed a finger at me.

"That's it!"

Things were 'overlapping' in many ways. That was the structure this had.

Augmented reality was the overlapping of cyber data over reality. And this world of dreams was the sharing of what was overlapped in the minds of people.

"Now then, this is a dream so we won't need to strain ourselves to escape, but can we make a plan regardless, the three of us?"

Paf, and K-san put her hands together.

"At times like these the first thing to do is drink some tea and calm down! Ah, but drinking it this late at night might mean we won't be able to sleep, won't we?"

"...you're pretty airheaded yourself."

"Caffeine in the middle of a dream, truly, we could even take a lethal dose of it."

A lethal dose would be around a hundred cups drank within two-three hours without stopping.

"A tea party in the dead of night, what a fascinating idea."

"But is water even gonna boil in this nonsense world?"

It boiled. In a few seconds.

We put water in the pot and the instant we lit a fire under it it was whistling.

"...this is indeed a dream."

We also baked cookies. In a few seconds.

No matter how much of the ingredients we used they never ran out, pre-heating the oven was instantaneous, and they baked right away, preposterous!

"But the flavor is as it should be, M-san."

The only one impressed was K-san.

"Maybe these are also zero calories, even better."



"My-my and my, what do we have here-here and here."

We were eating heartily-heartily-heartily.

"Ah, Assistant-kun's arrived too. Heeey, over here, over here!"

He had been wandering the alleys between tents, but now he too scampered over here.

"I am sorry, it is trouble as it usually is."

He understood, he seemed to say as he nodded firmly, then he too came to sit around the cooking fire with us.

"Is there no one else? Poc-ko, the fairies? Did you call them?"

"If you mean PocMon, then he is back at my tent, blinking. The girl seems unable to deal with this all. There were fairies as normal, but right now they seem busy."

"Blinking?," went K-san.

"She is half-existing, but half of her cannot exist here, so she remains in a stopped state."

"And why'd that be?"

"Isn't that because she hasn't inhaled the Rakukko Picolin? She's a machine, after all."

"Yes, that is how it is going to be. Still, what about her blinking, does that not mean that it is halfway through to being effective on her?"

"...yes, you are right about that."

That would mean the fairies were supporting PocMon, as well. Mh-hm.

Uhm, by the way, whispered Assistant-san in my ear.

"...what? The masks? Ahhh, you noticed it, did you. Indeed, I agree."

"What's with the masks?," went Y.

"Everybody was wearing the masks, right?"

The two simultaneously touched the area around their eyes and simultaneously slammed their eyes wide open.

"It's true. Before straying into the world of dreams I was wearing one. I was writing the script for the new episode, and..."

"I as well. I was playing with the sheep game app before sleeping..."

At present, the two of them were not wearing masks.

"What's it mean?"

"...once we finish with the tea we should search, then, see if there are other people."

Although I would not have minded if we had drunk leisurely, the two washed the contents of their cups down their throats in one go.

Following Y's words, as she said that she had an idea about who could be wearing masks, we moved to the Kusunoki ruins area.

The group of girls, at least as an estimate, numbered a thousand.

They were split into small groups of a dozen or more, keeping an odd distance between each other, forming colonies. Every group was keeping up a lively discussion, and the place as a whole had plenty of noise in the air.

"All of them without masks, I see."

K-san opened her mouth and immediately said that.

"I believe they all had it on before entering the world of dreams. They're waiting with bated breath for the next Our Way event."

"Let us make sure."

I approached a nearby colony.

"Hellooo, there is something we would like to ask."

"Wait. What faction are you?"

The representative of the girls asked that of us sharply.

"What do you mean, faction?"

"Let me explain. In series with a lot of bishonens, whoever they delusionally believe to have same-sex love for whoever else creates tons of arguments, so they split into factions.

Because these discussions are fundamentally impossible to settle, the relationships between factions inevitably collapse into reciprocal hostility. That's what they mean when they ask, so answer prudently. This does mean we should just tell 'em we support whatever coupling they do, but it gets us more manpower to have them as allies."

"..."

Y whispered that as I kept a stiff smile.

"While you speak, could you keep silent about me being the one who makes the 3D anime? It'll create a big ruckus, which would be a problem, and revealing myself would be just an annoyance. Prudence is vital in this job."

"...this stone bridge you are trying to charge your way across is a very dangerous one indeed."

"This is a world where the London Bridge has collapsed. That's the trend, make no mistake." Bah! And I turned my chin away.

There was not one point in question in her way of life.

"Well, which is it? Which couple do you back?"

I answered the pressing girl in stutters.

"Uhhmm, uhhmm... a particular couple... I do not have. Sorry."

"Well now, how improvised."

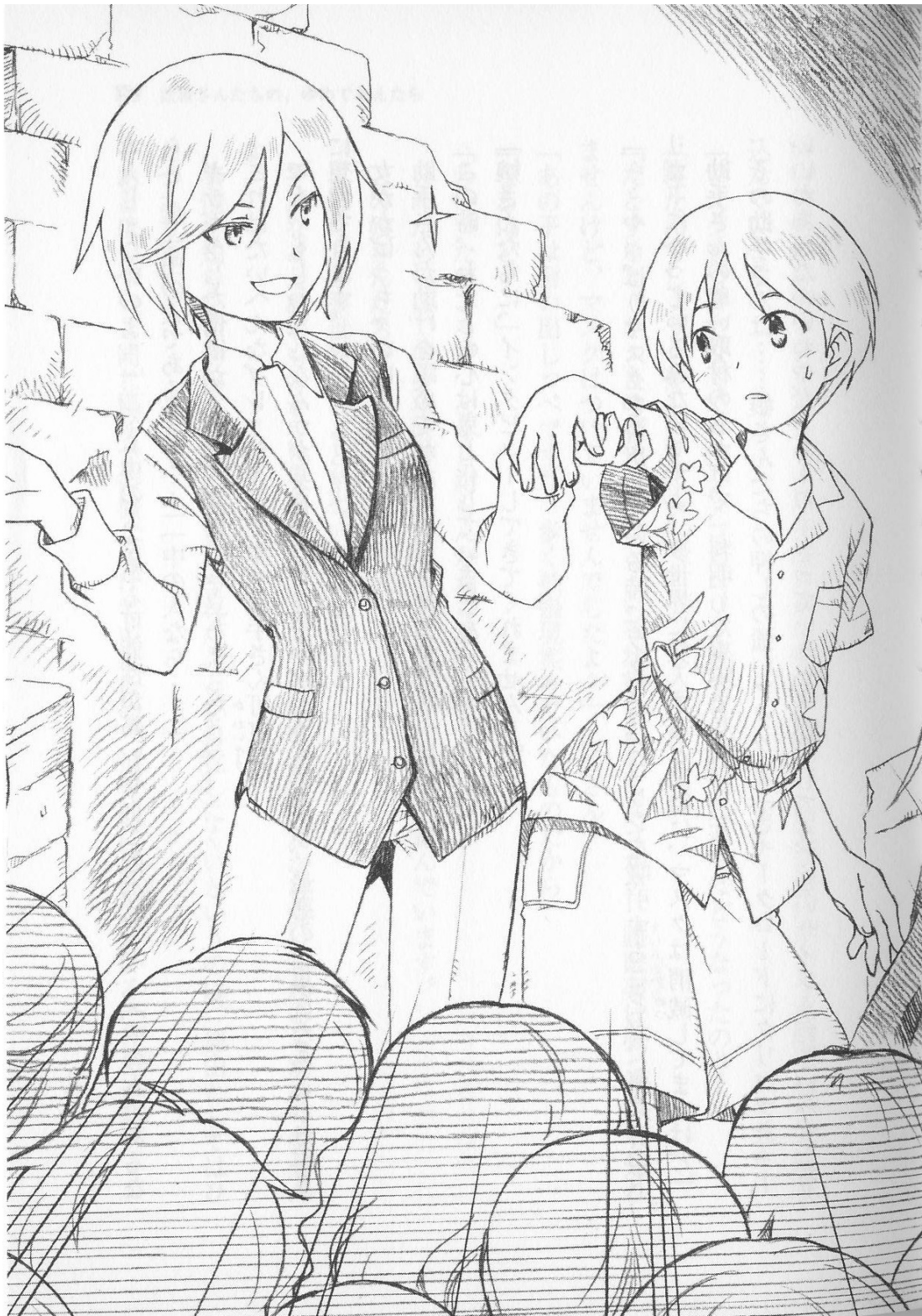
The girl lost interest in me in an instant and returned to the colony.

"...in exchange for not making anyone an enemy, the answer you gave made not one person our ally, huh."

"But I just wanted to ask a bit about how things are going..."

"No helping that. Guess we'll use the ace in the hole."

Y tugged the arm of Assistant-san, who was hiding behind me in fear (of the bizarre air exuding from the girls) and affectedly raised her voice.



"Whaaat, hey you, you really resemble the protagonist of Our Way (the name of the bishonen bowling 3D anime), Claude!"

Record scratch.

It happened the moment in which the near totality of the girls instantly focused on Assistant-san.

"...? ...?!"

This time Y used her low voice to say this to Assistant-san.

"Sorry. More than resemble, I used you as a model for the 3D data. If all of them were perfect and spectacular bishonens, see, the customer reaction would be slow. Times like this, you need to create an appropriate flaw in the character's design. That's why I set up the protagonist of Our Way as the type that has talent, but nothing else that stands out. That other extremely pretty bishonens would notice him has been a point of its success, I think. Well, it worked, so what to say. I'm grateful to you. Sorry for being so late in telling you."

I did not know whether that apology eventually worked with the terrified Assistant-san or not. That went despite how those were alien words of unclear meaning to begin with.

"You do resemble Claude...!" "Now that you say it... he's identical!" "I didn't even notice he existed until a moment ago..." "He's truly Claude." "No way, is he the model?" "Possibly, yes! The author of Our Way should be somewhere in this village, after all!" "What do we need to do to have an autograph?" "Wait a sec, he's not Claude himself!" "But the possibility that he's the one playing him is high!" "The one playing him..." "If he's the one playing him," "When he's the one playing him..." "So long as he's the one playing him..."

Bared lusts pierced through Assistant-san.

That was incredible pressure. Poor guy.

Still, if someone like me were to put her life at risk and defend him, it was easy to imagine that the result would be very bad.

This was a situation where a woman ought not intervene.

Assistant-san looked at me with eyes that asked for help.

Times like these, my very being turned into a demon.

"What do you say to an interview with the girls?"

"... as I thought, it appears that inhaling Rakukko Picolin while wearing the mask is the trigger to this shared dream. The masks disintegrate the moment one enters the world of dreams, however."

That was the fact we could confirm thanks to Assistant-san's gathering of precious information via interview.

Said Assistant-san was... being aggressively pressured by the attack of the girls (eek Claude with Kleinz eek it's fine yes you're fine yes awww jeez you look too much like him gimme a handshake please and an autograph and a hug is fine too eek eek eek!) on all sides, and as a result he was just feebly sitting down with a face lacking pigmentation.

"What happened to the ones that absorbed that Rakukko Picolin or whatever it was but weren't wearing masks?"

"They would be asleep. Without any dreams."

"Given that, what's going on with the way PocMon was earlier? She might have inhaled the sleeping powder, but she was not wearing a mask, was she?," went K-san.

"She was the one who started all this, she is like walking augmented reality."

"I see..."

"And now that we know that, what's all this place about?"

At present we were making a mixed circle with the bishonen-loving girls.
These girls were, what to even say!
They had not realized that they were in the world of dreams.
That was expectable, went the thought, and it could only be accepted as a fact.
They did not know the situation, and that was one reason why it was difficult for them to be aware of having been involved in an abnormality.
Also, since they have been laying in wait in the same place, they had been informationally insulated, of course.
But the foremost reason was that they had something else on their mind.
Whatever it may have been, today was apparently the day when there was a big event in the bishonen bowling anime.
"Late at night, in this location, all the five will meet here by coincidence, that's what written on the synopsis."
That was how the project leader, Y, explained it.
Details of the event revealed beforehand and thus known to all was dirty marketing, but rumor called rumor and, as a result, the majority of fans met here all at once.
The girls have been sleeping here for three days. All to secure a good spot.
Those vital AR masks of theirs having vanished like smoke did create a big bustle among the girls. The shock of the missing masks came first and foremost, they did not have the wherewithal to see whether anything else was off.
"Is it truly that immersive a tool, then?"
Would mankind be revitalized if they directed that zeal towards something else?
"Uhm, Y-sensei... without a mask, once the time arrives they will not be able to see the event, correct?"
"That's how it is. That noise they were making earlier was precisely about that."
"I'm worried about possible outbursts of violence."
That was the expectable opinion of covert operative K-san.
"Would that be a real problem? After all, it's a dream."
"You may be the only who thinks that, sensei..."
Exactly. Regardless of this being a dream, those around us were growing quite agitated.
"Say, at what hour does the event start?"
"Midnight on the dot."
The massive scattering of Rakukko Picolin had happened at around nine.
Thus, between this and that, it has been about two hours since we came to the world of dreams, I believe?
And there I looked at my watch, which made my thinking a little dazed.
"What is it?"
"The dial is hazy and I can't read the numbers... also it feels like my consciousness is being tugged at, it is a little bit icky."
The two simultaneously looked at their wrists and, in the same brief time as my experience, felt their thoughts falter.
"It's a dream event, though, anything can happen there," went Y. "Ayup, it's a dream, so the concept of time doesn't exist, am I right?"
"That cannot be. At some point we have to wake up from the dream, you know?"
"But time in a dream isn't really something you pay as much attention to as in reality."
We hmmm'd simultaneously.
"Come on, Helen, let's search for the masks already." "No way, while we search someone

else will take this spot!" "But even if we secure the place, we got no masks, so..." "Shouldn't just one of us alone go get them?" "We're searching for something that nobody knows where it's gone, we gotta split up."

The girls' arguments seemed to be coming to a standstill.

"Say, you two, we can stay here all we like but there is nothing for us to do, and there is no threat of violence, so how about we leave here for a while?"

"I had the same thought! We have to search for a possible way of waking up, don't we?"

K-san gave me a vigorous gaze with a pose like she was praying to Maria-sama.

"...ah, no, since I think we will wake up at some point, I was proposing we did something like exploring, just to expend some of that time..."

"...ah."

I would have been happy had I not been looked at with a gaze of contempt.

For her own, Y was all over this.

"Then let's go. An experience like this is rare to have."

And so the four of us peaceably strolled around the Village.

As said earlier, the world of dreams still adhered to reality. We walked about, but the scene around us was as always, our eyes did not spot anything new.

"Stimulation's lacking here. I so wish there was good stuff, like a pink penguin or the US flag hung on the moon. This isn't going to satisfy customers."

...and already she was talking about how everything was boring-oh-so-boring.

"This conformity to reality is perhaps dependent on the shared consciousness of a large number of people."

Also, it was maybe because there were a lot of people who did not believe this was a dream.

"In other words, the dream is controlled by the consciousnesses of everybody..."

Y yawned. I reflexively straight-manned her.

"Really now, yawning in a dream."

K-san snorted a laugh.

Y growled, then uttered an excuse.

"...I'm not sleepy at all, though. I suppose that if this were as usual, then it would have been just the right time for a yawn, I guess."

"Yawns being commanded by the power of the will is dream-like."

"If so, then as long as we think it, we could make anything reality, could we?"

K-san slammed her eyes shut and began silently praying for something.

"What is that?"

"I thought of trying to make some snow fall... but it seems to not be working."

She had prayed hard, but there was not a single cloud in the night sky.

"Might only work if you make a wish as spontaneous as drawing breath. Dreaming is the domain of the subconscious, right? You must approach it not from the surface level, but from the deepest consciousness."

"...that's really hard."

"A practitioner of yoga or something would totally be able to get this to work!"

"By that reasoning, humans who have dreams are all impressive and ascetic practitioners of something."

"Jung, was it? The one about the collective subconscious."

"Ahhh, it was him, it was. I read him at The School. But it's got nothing to do with all this, right?"

"What are you talking about?"

K-san, who had followed her parents' footsteps and become a covert operative, never went to a school except for a small, private one back when she was young. She would not have learned about Jung, of course.

Carl Gustav Jung was the name of a scholar from the ancient past. Actual era unknown. Founder of Jungian psychology.

He said something to the gist of, humans have an inherent psychological structure and that creates common points between the myths of the many lands of the world.

Despite being myths born in vastly different cultural environments, there were many points in common, that was a point cited often.

"Uh-huh. And why would a psychological mechanism like that exist?"

"We do not know. Seems that evolution just brought us to that without a real point."

"Really, we don't know? Jung's relationship with his rival Freud was kind of moe, though. Call it a missed opportunity."

"...what did you even expect when reading them?"

"I did learn by myself about some of the scholars of the distant past."

"Huuuh, which ones, K-san?"

"A great papercrafter known as Noppo San, I know that he's the founder of Noppo-style Crafts."

...there, out she came with an unknown branch of learning.

"Did he leave behind some great achievement in his craft?," went Y.

"He did indeed! Knightgaunt-kun, for example, he used his crafting skills to weaken even monsters of the sort that come up in mythology and rescued people! He was truly amazing!"

...she was releasing waves that said that she really believed that.

"Huuuh... amazing..."

I liked K-san and did not want to hurt her, so I acted as surprised as I ought have been (although I was not good at that sort of acting...).

"So, what were we talking about?"

Y made a marvelous return back to the main topic.

"We jumped from dreams being shared to discussing the collective unconscious."

"That we did. Well, to say how it goes, Jung may have talked about humans being all connected, but it shouldn't be anything occult, right?"

"That is correct. We merely have the same psychological structure, it does not mean that we are linked. Besides, I think the real core of the matter is how people who have been put to instant sleep thanks to Rakukko Picolin are now sharing a dream via the masks."

"I didn't expect this much out of those masks."

"Exactly, I do not understand the logic behind that in the slightest. They are not Fairy Tools, they are advanced but in the end they are still a scientific instrument."

Which all meant, then, that the sleeping drug was acting as intermediary, I wondered?

There was nothing definite tying the Fairy Tool medicine back to the dream. It did not seem that a conclusion would come no matter how hard I thought.

Eventually, by the time we had exhausted anything to discuss about the matter, our feet had taken us nearly outside the town area.

Outside the Village there was a sprawl of low hills. That much was as in reality. The sole and only difference was that it was all covered by bunches of suspicious plants.

"...and so we chance on a somewhat creepy scene," went Y.

"I wonder what those plants are. I have never seen any like them before."

The two of us of course felt something out of place and repeatedly rubbed our eyes.

We headed for the gazebo of a nearby hip-roofed building and took a break. Or so I say, but we were not feeling the slightest bit of physical fatigue.

"That weird grass seems to be growing really well here outside the Village."

Y's words gave me a jolt of the shivers, gazing as we were at the swarm of plants blotting out everything outside the Village. The reason we felt them creepy was in how all the plants were facing towards the Village. We could not avoid concluding that their flowers were attracted to the light as they edged in towards the Village.

"Well, whatever happens in the world of dreams is no cause to fear for us who live in the real world."

Y mumbled that, then chewed on a crisp cracker with cheese on it.

Tea was steaming on top of the table.

...although I did not remember brewing any.

The subconscious, then. Our subconscious had to be altering this dream with the same spontaneity as drawing breath.

That was an extremely appropriate phenomenon for a world of dreams.

"Those plants were also growing here and there in the Village. Not with that density, though."

"Without someone to trim them everything gets covered with weeds, that's the same as in reality, I guess," went Y.

"Awww, I wanted to examine them closely, but I cannot look at them straight on."

"What about using the corners of your eyes?"

"Is it that easy?"

"Well, though you can't observe them straight and forwardly, they are very clear when using the corner of your eye. Feels sort of like cheating in an exam by peeking at your neighbor's answer."

"What a dirty comparison."

Still, I did see them quite clearly when I tried to do as she said. How frustrating.

"...human cunning is the best cunning, indeed."

Now that I could examine them very closely, my curiosity was piqued. I left the gazebo and approached the pressing mass of weeds with wide strides.

"Oi... they might be man-eating plants, don't do anything rash!"

"It is all right! Perhaps even safe!"

The plants were of odd shapes, it was like they had evolved on a different planet. Despite that we could directly sense they were plants, and the reason is that they oozed with 'plant-likeness'.

When looked at directly they were off-focus, when looked at with the corner of the eyes they were somewhat distinct.

As I had intuited earlier, they had by nature the ability to avoid direct observation.

...I had the feeling that I had been touched by these things several times so far.

I extended my hand towards one of these well-growing plants.

Right before my fingers could pluck out its stalk, the plant shattered and disappeared. It seemed like the strong sense that was touch had pushed the plant itself somewhere else.

Right then, my senses felt a faint gaze.

A little girl was standing there, concealed by the bizarre plants.

It was the girl that I had seen through the mask.

She was a girl that had no clear details to her, just like the plants. She had just the 'girl-likeness' as fundamental principle.

Her figure had phosphorescent wings on her back and appeared like a folkloristic fairy. She differed from the fairies we knew well, she was an old-fashioned fairy. For example, like the fairy queen that appear in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.
"Titania."



Waves were exuding from the whole of her body.

I had to protect myself. Thinking subconsciously I happened to extend my hand, and the little girl jumped back like she was afraid.

Right, if I touched her... something bad would happen, I could feel it.

For a while we stayed vigorously conscious of each other, me from the corner of my eyes, she straight and forwards. Eventually she... Titania... spun around to show me her back, then disappeared beyond the thicket of plants.

After that, the four of us decided to drop by the square.

We did not think that we would find anything no matter how long we kept walking about outside like that.

This was just my suspicion, but the world of dreams was originally an unconquered land, and that dreamland Kusunoki was formed through the cooperation among those who were sharing a dream via Rakukko Picolin.

And so the possibility was high that ours was the only inhabited village in the world.

So long as we accepted that, next came only the search for means to return to reality. But once we had, the bishonen bowling fans needed to come with us.

And at one point...

"Mh?"

My eyes were irresistibly drawn towards one of the destroyed buildings.

...something worried me.

"Sorry, please go on ahead. I will catch up right away."

"Huh-hunh, going to pick flowers even in the world of dreams?"

Utterly ignoring the refined bad joke of Y's I carefully laid my toes inside a building with no roof.

Inside the building's buried room, from the mountain of piled debris, one could spot something that it would have been impossible to spot without extreme luck, and still something that one would be unable to ignore: a weak green light filtering in.

I lifted the debris to find an old, large transmitter buried there.

Perhaps someone was collecting them, or perhaps it was used as means of personal transmission, that I did not know, but I was confident that the same thing had to exist in the real side of all this.

As it was for some reason running, the green reception indicator was blinking on and off.

"...hello?"

I put the receiver at my ear and,

"It you?"

Though it had not been that long, I felt incredible nostalgia for that voice.

"G-, grandfather?!"

I nearly jumped in place.

"Yeah, it's me... are you... listening...?"

The accuracy of the transmission was bad and was mixed with a noise like sand was pouring in my ear. I enveloped the receiver with my hands and pushed it into the ear. That still did not make me hear well, however.

"Grandfather, you know, I cannot quite hear..."

"Truth is... we got some problem... can't come back home for a while."

"What, you cannot return? Why?"

"The shuttle... damaged..."

"So you are on the moon right now?!"

"Right, the moon... the ruins... of moon's surface city..."

"Ruins... are those safe?"

I was so anxious I could not sort through my thoughts.

"Don't know exactly how to tell you, but... it seems we've avoided the worst."

"S-, so you did..."

The relaxation of muscles I felt all through my body was real. Despite this being a dream.

"...the fairies seems to not get motivation if there aren't enough sweets... result, we are... and that's the situation."

The noise was gradually growing and I became unable to properly hear his voice.

"What? What is that? I cannot quite hear."

"The connection is weak, see, and I can't waste energy... regardless... I leave the rest to you."

The green light suddenly turned red.

Grandfather's voice disappeared along with the sound of interference.

"Hey! Grandfather, come back!"

No response.

I really did not understand their situation, however, they were safe... ish.

"Then it is all right."

...wait, would it be all right?

I did not quite understand.

I did not quite understand, but one of my worries was eased and in dramatic ways, that was fact. Even if it was only an event that happened inside a dream.

"What a good dream."

I looked up at the moon. When I thought Grandfather might be there I felt a strong emotion.

I could see the night sky like it had streaks of faint light. Each and every ray felt like white mist, however the countless streaks of light criss-crossed and illuminated the whole of the heavens. They resembled vapor trails.

This was the first time I had noticed them.

What could they be?

They felt like they were located higher than clouds or rainbows.

The more I strained my eyes, the more the streaks seemed to be avoiding my examination and turning thinner. Because I had lifted my head up like that I, suddenly, felt my eyes darken. And like that the world became dark. Despite how I had my eyes open.

I lost my eyesight, and soon after that my sense of balance became unreliable, and as last my consciousness slowly but surely sunk away.

It was morning.

I found that I had slept face-down in the foldable bed that I used in the tent.

I did not go to sleep properly, I had collapsed. My clothes were the same as the past evening's, and there was nothing that said I had changed them, either.

I lifted up and the mask peeled off and fell down from around my eyes.

"...I feel refreshed."

I believed that was my first restful sleep in a long while.

Time was noon on the dot.

Did that mean I had slept over fourteen hours?

Normally, sleeping that much made my head feel heavier, but the first sleep in a long time after that much insomnia felt just excellent. Like a sponge that had sucked up water, my brain

felt capable of clearer, more energetic activity.

"I will no longer be proud about not sleeping...!"

Sleeping was awesome. Lack of sleep, not so nice.

"Oooh, you finally woke up?"

Right at the entrance of the tent, jutting her head in, was Y.

"Ah, say, last night's..."

"You mean the dream, right? We gotta talk about that. Let's have lunch while we do."

As people settled into a lifestyle of escapism, next to the watering place there came to be a variety of stalls and food carts nestled close together. It had become the site for filling oneself with food so, naturally, it gathered a lot of people. In spite of that, the supplies were abundant, so the faces of the people present were all relaxed.

I was taken to one of the several open tents they had there.

"Dear me, Assistant-san. Good morning."

He was sketching as well as holding a space for us at the tent's dining table, and he only faced us to give a brief nod, returning to his work right away.

What was he drawing?

Both of Y's hands were filled with dangling baskets as we entered the tent.

"We're late for the noon meal, so we got nothing but the tea set, it all right?"

"It is fine, thank you."

We had black tea, scones, sandwiches, and fresh figs as dessert.

A good sleep recovered appetite. They were all delicious, and at the relaxed time of post-having tea, Y began speaking.

"This's what happened after we separated. After we parted ways, we returned to where the Our Way fans laid in wait. We thought that without the masks then the event would naturally not happen. But then it happened as normal."

"...the augmented reality thing?"

"Yup. Even without masks."

"That was because it was a dream..."

"Easy to say that, but of course it's sorta weird."

Y said that the event had already started when they had returned to its location.

In short, the bowling bishonens gathered and had their drama. And, like she said, that event was visible to the naked eye within the dream.

"Initially it was exactly as per my script. That's why I thought the thing would progress as I programmed it. The part that was weird was the second half. What were clearly characters in a scripted scene began saying and acting outside of the script. I saw this myself, it's conclusive."

I had it that this bishonen bowling drama was not originally about same-sex love.

It was a pure sports-shonen thing, but although it had room for that same-sex 'touch', there were no scenes where a man would directly express a variety of shapes of love such as embracing another man and going, *"I'll never hand you over to a woman"*.

"Once a certain type of relationship-ish thing is depicted with sufficient skill, then space for delusions opens up. I targeted all ages, ensuring that it would be specialized in the sort of things that would even make children passionate about it."

"You targeted nothing in particular, then?"

"...but then, you see, it just kept going and going towards relationships of love. It shocked me.

As if things would ever go that far, I even told myself. Surely fulfilling the desires of the audience would make the story stronger, right? Instead, starting to rely on the direct

presentation of that sort of stuff made things gradually deeper and narrower. It moved towards being for hardcore fans only. In the beginning, Our Way only aimed to create comprehensive delusions between each possible pairing of main characters, fixing couples was completely besides its concept, that's how it was. So far so simple, you get it, right?"

"Mh-hm."

"The viewers' gallery was in uproar. Particularly last night, when the only love relationships created were the popular ones. It was an uproar. But behind that, the groups that supported other couples, which I expected would be large in number, mostly withdrew. The coming rewrite isn't gonna be trivial, that I can tell you."

"What if the story changed just because you were in a dream?"

"I thought about that, but when I tried checking the server data, I found that the relevant text was broken."

I was taken aback.

"What? You mean a dream has manipulated reality?"

"I don't know about that. Still, computer data, well, still fits under 'reality', I suppose?"

"Of course it does, and still..."

"You're right, I guess. Augmented reality is a layer set on top of reality, so in a certain sense, I thought that maybe it resembled the layer we call dreams."

An absurd utterance.

"Neither theory has substance, still, are there other points of commonality?"

"Both of them are direct extensions of human consciousness."

A bizarre silence fell on both of us.

Eventually Y went, "this isn't what I specialize in," then cleared her throat.

"Look, though we call it reality, it still exists as data. It might not be impossible to access it via the masks even while we're sleeping. If so then this works the same way, but it's a more realistic explanation, right?"

The world of dreams. Subconscious manipulation. Water that boils in a few seconds. Click, and a lightbulb lit up inside my head.

"Say. When sharing the dream, could the couple number one in popularity be born by a very, very, very strong wish?"

"You understand that this can't be just about wishing, right?"

"Maybe the dream can be augmented and shared through the masks."

Y's face bloomed with the blush of understanding.

"...could that be it, maybe? It's hard to get a handle on all of this, though..."

"Calling it the world of dreams is sorta vague, so we might look at it as augmenting subconscious psychology, linking it into a cyberspace."

Y leaned forwards and laid on the table, crossed arms and all.

"And what makes it all work like that are the masks?"

"That, and the sleeping medicine made by the fairies, what do you say?"

"That sleeping medicine... is it all gone now?"

"Yes, blown away by the wind."

"...then this all ends in a one-night-only miracle."

"Precisely, a midsummer night's dream. Although it is not Summer."

"Then that's all over, ladies and gents, that's all over!"

Y comfortably entrusted her back to the chair. Her mood said that this had been solved for her.

"By the way, Assistant-san, what have you been drawing so zealously of late?"

The sketchbook was spun so as to show it to us.
"Ah, are those the dreamworld plants?"



They were the ephemeral dream plants that refused touch and direct line of sight.
And he had spent several pages sketching those.
"Yes, indeed. That was what they looked like. Well done observing them to that extent. What? You could look at them carefully when reflected in a hand mirror, and then memorized what you had seen? Really?"
The Power of Ephemerality was slain with a mirror, then? Unexpectedly rubbish, was it...
"But personally, I sort of do like mysterious things like these. This feels like a work of natural art as cultivated in the world of human hearts, does it not? I would want some of them in planters, if it were possible."
I had quite the cultural open-mindedness for the fantastic.
"These were the weeds back in the dream world, right? Were they like that? I see. How weird."
Y was instead the embodiment of the vast and deep ditch between entertainment and the cultural arts.

With this, the only pressing problem boiled down to the obstetrician.
I decided to not be daunted and continue to send inquiry letters. I sent all I could send that I had not sent to before, to my gracious teachers and fellow School alumni, cultural office chiefs, and even to acquaintances that may have even the slightest to do with this.
As for people whom I believed had personal connections, I sent them an official telegram. The urgency of the matter should have been conveyed.
Bit by bit, good-omened notices came in from every nook and cranny of the country.

"You seem vigorously dedicated to the job, so be at ease. It's the first time I've heard of the term 'breech birth', you see. As far as specialist obstetricians I've no idea who to contact, but if you need a skilled surgeon, then I do know one. He has experience with C-sections, should I have him ready as a precaution?"

"Onee-san! I've sent you more than a hundred letters, and I was happy to have gotten even just three replies! The gap between the second and the third was long, but... that's in fact a plus! I'm now even more joyful! By the way, I know no obstetrician, and I can't help with the birth either, but please let me assist anyway. Soon I will be traveling... no! I feel starting preparations tomorrow... or rather! I have already sorted out my luggage... and so! Should I leave tonight?"

**"HAVE NO DOCTORS STOP DO WELL BY YOURSELF STOP NO DEATHS STOP :-)
STOP"**

...huh, first time I have seen someone use smileys in a telegram.

I sent even more replies, some accepting the proposals, some as letters of refusal (particularly to that second reply).

As the days went by, with YoungMama-san' delivery date approaching to the point that it was right before our eyes, I was able to invite several doctors to the Village. It was just, sad to say, that I could not locate a single person who was specialized in troubled births. Still, even if outside their area of expertise, they were doctors and no mistake.

Together with the group of Village ladies that graciously undertook the roles of nurse assistants, the team of doctors was complete.

They had few examples of difficult births, this was said even by the doctors that we had invited.

Perhaps it's an influence of our decline, uttered the eldest among the doctors.

But once decline was our norm, should the number of healthy births not have declined as well?

It went like this, in short: whenever the birth became troubled, the near totality was beyond rescuing and thus set no precedent... right.

I of course avoided mentioning that to the relevant person.

It would have been bad influence that could have interfered with the birth, see.

"Right, it's possible that they will have to do a C-section... well, it's much better than nothing. Thank you."

Her face showed unease, but she still gave me a bow.

...our line-up was less than ideal, I apologize.

But there were absolutely not going to be deaths, that much I could guarantee.

For that event I have made ready a clean birthing place, scraped together the necessary medical equipment, thoroughly read books on birth, welcomed the doctors I had invited, and worked hard to bribe fairies.

And then came the day of the delivery, which we welcomed in a bright white hospital tent.

I had twenty fairies hold the perimeter, making things as perfect as I could.

"...there's nothing that says that the baby is about to be born."

With a relaxed face the surgeon strode out of the tent.

"Did we make a mistake on the date of delivery?"

There was so little that said that the baby will be born, in fact, that moodwise everyone should be allowed to leave for the day.

Bringing up the rear was YoungMama with a nonchalant face, showing up with light and brisk steps.

"Not the time yet, it looks like."

"I did think your belly was all too small for it being right before the date of delivery."

That belly certainly could not possibly be that of someone in their tenth month of pregnancy. "Maybe there was a mistake in the diagnosis. I'm no specialist so I can't tell, but at present she's maybe in the sixth or seventh month."

The elder surgeon, as representative of the team, explained it like that.

"Excuse me, but could I have you stay in this area in that while...?"

"Sorry. I just can't stay here that long. There's lots of patients everywhere, you know. For now I'll be leaving, but once the time comes, call me again, that's all I can do."

The other doctors were in similar situations.

I could not hold them here against their will, so it came down to giving them my thanks and making ready for their return home.

"...sigh, that was sort of anti-climactic."

YoungMama whispered that as she scythed the grass with a tree branch she had picked up. Her face was cheerful. The only problem was that that sense of liberation came from pushing the problem further ahead.

...did this girl actually want to give birth, I wondered?

"This augmented reality mask is really interesting. Heard you made it, is it true?"

"We did not make it, we just put together the system. It was for my job."

"Still, it was amazing, wasn't it? It'd be nice if there were more games and the like."

Maybe she felt uneasy, maybe she had too much free time, but she occasionally came to visit me informally, without pressing matters. Today, too, was the same.

Philip the Third (the sheep) had for some reason become quite afraid of humans ever since he had greeted me in the dream, and to make sure he would not get even more circular bald patches I was tending to him using a long pole while we sat on the fence, the lady gazing at me while she kept talking about whatever she happened to talk about.

I did not mind that.

It was just that every time I looked at her belly, which had not gotten bigger (rather it felt like it had flattened), my heart went swaying between unease and doubt.

"This is weird."

One day, PocMon hopped in my lap and brought this to my attention.

"The volume of transmissions of the augmented reality network has increased dramatically."

That meant that the number of users had dramatically increased.

"Is that not a good thing?"

"But it's strange. You don't see nearly anyone in the Village wearing masks. The apps have increased in number, but I've no idea how any of that stuff would be used for."

Told that I tried examining the server's list, and sure enough, a tremendous number of new apps had been set up.

It was just that they rarely came with instructions, and while I downloaded some to try them, I could not make proper use of the majority of them. It could be that their real purpose was elsewhere, and perhaps that it was being communicated orally, if so full marks for feeling underground.

"Looks like people have used the app development tools."

There was even a wiki made by who knows who.

One such that anyone who gave it a quick study would be able to develop applications.

"I thought the users had increased so I too did my best and widened the support area, but all that happened is that some bizarre signals increased, reality wasn't being augmented at all.

That's really disappointing!"

Sure thing was, there was honestly no sign of change in the Village's lifestyle. Rather it became calmer, or should I say that population had decreased? Something like that.

"There may be things that we have overlooked. We should ask the fairies."

I caught the fairy that had docked on top of PocMon's head.

Lately there have been very few fairies around, they were becoming quite rare.

"There are fairies here?! Where!"

"...please awaken to your own self some more if you wish to see them."

Maybe if she did her best for a hundred years or so her fingertips could brush with theirs in her lifespan.

"Am I under arrest? Am I going to be under arrest?"

I dangled the fairy as I strode through the tent city.

"...do they currently pay out a reward for arresting me?"

"Here, ready for you, a brand new creation."

I searched through my pockets and offered him a fairy-sized swirly candy.

"What a coquettish item!"

He enjoyed it, that was the important thing.

"This one is imitating a snail?"

"...huh? No, it is a normal candy, there are many like it, you see."

He was really happy, but there seemed to be no sign of him subdividing.

"These days you do not seem to subdivide much."

"...maybe because unpaid overtime is increasing."

"But I have not made any request, you know? What job would that be?"

"If I could remember, it wouldn't be so difficult."

...meaning it was.

As PocMon said, I saw nearly no one wearing a mask. Occasionally I did see one... but it was truly occasionally.

And there I realized one thing besides that.

"People... are decreasing..."

Walking out during sunlit hours made it easy to see. The Village was clearly growing more desolate.

Density, as far as it felt like, had decreased by half.

It had not felt this desolate even when there had been a hurry of people moving away.

Say whatever you please, there was something to do during daytime. Tending the sheep, exchanging information, doing things around the house you lived in, right now those were all things that were not happening.

Did they leave the Village without contacting us, then?

There was no point in moving away without the authorization of the authority that managed rationing tickets. Normally they would have left a report, unless they wanted to forfeit their lives.

Without that, it then became a question of where in the Village they were...

"Bwah, weeds are growing already over here."

"Lively and well?"

"Awww, this used to be such a beautiful house, but a fire burned it away..."

"Sure enough, lively and well?"

"Awww, here too we had an arch that was so well cared for, now there is not even the shape left!"

"Lots of that vintage feeling, lots of it?"

"Things go awry quickly when people do not dwell there, do they."

Ho-hoh, and the fairy was impressed.

"Silly master human, do you like it only when things are pretty and clean?"

"Not nice adding 'only' to that..."

Though it was true.

Seeing broken wood piled to a mountain at the edge of the street, not cleared out but abandoned there just like that, was also a tough scene to see.

"Forget about augmenting reality, we could not even cover up the damages, truly... right?"

"Should us guys do it?"

"I politely decline the offer♪."

Because it looked like they would double the mess.

The two of us stretched our legs even more towards the ruins. The destruction covered a large area, so at the moment it was an area completely devoid of other people.

At the edge of that desolate road I spotted fairies surrounding an open can.

"Master human, my friends are over there!"

"Dear me, it is true."

The desk pad fairy hopped off from my pocket and ran towards his friends. "How's it been?"

"No idea whatsoever!," they actually gossiped.



Looking much, much closer I saw that the open can had an open fire lit in it, and the several fairies surrounding it seemed for some reason dejected.

"Say, what are you people doing in a place this desolate?"

"Ah, it's a human..." "Been a while'sh..." "Weee..."

"Not in happy moods, I see."

"...we're unemployed."

"U-, unemployed?"

"These're hard days!" "We're in a recession!" "In the past it was good?" "Are politicians to blame?" "Or are the people?" "The leaders of the Left and the Right?" "I so want a job?"

"Good afterworking!"

I see, these ones were making a play surrounding the open fire, pretending they were without

work.

I could vaguely understand the reason for why they were without employment.

"I apologize. These days I have been working hard and have not sought out your fairy powers at all, you understand."

Given that, after all, whenever fairies were involved, the mess that followed would be of festival-revelry level.

I did not dislike that, but at times it was problematic.

"There's also that, but..."

"There are other reasons why you are unemployed?"

"The master humans who dream are invincible?" "They don't need to be helped!" "They save themselves with their own strength!" "There's nothing more for us to do?"

"The master humans... plural, who dream?"

As I asked a cat, acting like he was toying with prey and with the hubris of having no one above him, jumped into the group of fairies.

"What the-, watch out!"

First I quenched the fire in the open can. It could cause a bigger fire, which would be dangerous.

"Piii?!" "Mah gawd?!" "HaPnh!!!"

The cat scattered the fairies, tossing the Rounded-Up individuals away with his cat punches.

The fairies scattered away and escaped, and the cat himself chased after them.

"...dear me, dear me."

Dreaming people. These keyword and PocMon's doubts fit perfectly and brought me to a specific truth.

Of course, it was that Rakukko Picolin still existed somewhere.

That is because, without it, one could not go to the world of dreams.

That fit perfectly with a Village devoid of people, however at present I did not want to have that nasty idea.

To continue the investigation I necessarily had to reacquire some Rakukko Picolin.

But as it happened, this had to be the one time in which I could not gain access to any fairies.

I really had the sense that their number had decreased. I could not believe that they were imitating even the depopulation... no, that was absurd, come now.

Could I rely on the power of Science?

I accessed the augmentation network and activated the virtual keyboard.

I input keywords such as *Rakukko Picolin*, *sleeping medicine*, and *dream* to distill a transmission history that had swelled to the size of a dictionary. My sights were instantly filled by rows of text.

"Wah, this is getting too big..."

There were only too many.

Which meant that among the populace, and in particular among those highly media literate, the subject of sleeping medicine was hot.

Once I had gotten this far, the information I wanted was right there.

It looked like that, to obtain Rakukko Picolin, one had to download a specific app.

I promptly accessed the app center and sorted the list by popularity. Though several hundred apps swiftly appeared, the most popular one remained *Getcha Treasure (R)*.

What was the R about?

Since I did not know, I downloaded it and started it, there.

When I did, an arrow overlapping the ground began blinking. Same as with the usual guidance softwares.

I went walking, following the arrow, and discovered that, despite this area being so desolate, there was a long, snaking queue.

With eyes like dead fishes the people did not engage in idle talk as they stood in line.

I stuffed the Rounded Up fairy in my pocket and wordlessly stood at the end of that queue.

The queue was well controlled, but because of the several times that it twisted back and forth, I could not see the start of it.

Moodwise this was strikingly similar to when people who, right after that thing with the Monument, found themselves unable to cook for themselves, and thus got emergency rice distributed at the Office.

Without any disorder, the line moved at quite the speed. At the end there was a khaki-colored tent set up. Before the tent there stood, as if gatekeepers, two girls who were controlling the queue. The arrow in *Getcha Treasure (R)* that indicated the final destination went inside that tent.

It had not taken so much as ten minutes since I first stood in line for my turn to come.

The keepers made a *get in* with their chins and the clerk at the counter inside wordlessly gave me one dose's worth of powdery medicine.

Simultaneously, the celebratory word "CONGRATULATION!!" appeared in my sights.

"YES, YES, YOU GOT IT SO PLEASE LEAVE RIGHT AWAY."

I was shooed out with cruel and all-caps words. Even then, a new line had formed behind me.

"...this is truly thriving."

And in my hand, a pouch with one dose of Rakukko Picolin.

But how did it get here?

When I at long last could log in to the dream world, I was taken aback.

What the previous time was a city of ruins very much like reality felt like a completely different world. At night the central square normally falls into utter silence, but now it had transfigured into a spectacular and amazing park.

Fireworks were being fired without stop into the night sky, and hot air balloons, dragons, deep sea fishes and more were freely flying about. Some people were firing pistols into the night sky, amusing themselves in shooting down fist-sized stars from the heavens.

Neon tubes whose craftsmanship exuded novel ideas were blinking here and there, but once examined closely it was visible that these were vines that grew like that by themselves.

Music from all over the world was being played and dinner parties were being held everywhere. People were virtual (-ly dressed as) whatever-they-pleased, aristocrats, mounted cavalry, armored knights, mysterious people, and were drinking and eating and dancing in a feverish revelry.

Making her way through the masquerade of people was a face I knew.

"Hiii-i. Came to pick you up. Getting a late start again, are we? You sure it's all right for someone who calls herself a Mediator?"

I felt slightly nostalgic about Y's face. I wondered why. The answer was that I had not seen her for a few days.

"...ah, is it possible that you have been hanging around here all this time?"

"Correct!"

This was most definitely the sort of event that she liked.

Still, it was quick of her to get here... she had quite the sense of smell.

"I only learned today that Rakukko Picolin was on the black market. Or rather, if you knew about it, you should have told me."

"I've been focusing on the dream for a while, see. It got augmented right there and then, every day there's continuous changes. Honestly, I don't really have memories of spending days in here. Plus I thought you'd find your way here first by your own talents."

"The matter of the birth was a real problem..."

"That, huh. Heard they miscalculated the delivery date."

"Let's put that for later, now, for later. Since you have been here for long, then you could please tell me about this situation on the double. Is it bad? Or is it good?"

I asked her half-desperately and she made a stumped face.

"I don't think it's bad, but... personally, I missed the ride, I suppose."

"Oh dear, that is rare."

I believed her style to approach things was to get on board with them right away and take them as far as they would go.

"Nah, it's just, in the beginning I thought I'd get involved. But it looked kinda hard to target and get things under control. No matter how firmly I committed a script, it ended up changed by the wishes of the majority. That felt futile. Well, if things were normal then I'd go along with it anyway, but because I was in the mood to make a video product, I was a bit screwed."

I looked around and,

"This is quite the transformation, I say."

"Cause it's an augmented dream. The basis is a dream, but the work is man-made."

"Ah-hah! So that large number of apps of unknown usage were made for all this."

"Apps for use in reality should have an R circled by parenthesis. The recent ones, at least."

Yes, I see...

"Right now it looks like you are missing your mask, but you are wearing one in reality, so its functions also get mixed into all this. But the apps' ability to keep control isn't perfect. Initially, this all worked as the developers intended, but the parts that the users didn't like, less by creative ideas and more by collective intellect, began being amended in the form of catering to the masses. Same as with the Our Way script."

"Once the base work is made and released, the users make up the finish by their own accord. Bwah, how easy!"

"What's easy and fun about this is jamming in more and more app-fied rules. The result was this incredible mess. Gourmet food apps, dress-up apps, simple fireworks creators, and much more. All people crave for is supplied to them just as they wish it."

"Their dreams going as they wish for is, well, a good thing, is it not?"

"Way back when at The School, means to control which dreams we had were popular, right?"

For example, putting the photo of someone you like under the pillow would mean you'd see them in the dream. Once those become shared, it's easy for a large number of wishes to converge into a single point, and the output of this elaboration grows even larger. Besides, there's apps giving it an outline, so this can all be efficiently built on a large scale."

"...uh-huh."

"What do you think? 'Bout all this?"

It was definitely lively, it certainly looked fun, and everything went like you pleased, which I overall thought narcissistic.

"...well, I am used to the mess that fairies make, so I am not particularly impressed."

Night is when you sleep *soundly*.

"Thought you'd say that," said Y with a cynical smile. "But you will make an inspection, right?"

There are apps that are indispensable if you want to walk about in this world, you should install 'em."

I installed the several apps she suggested me and a rapid stream of rows of miscellaneous additional information appeared before my eyes.

"These are in the way, I cannot see ahead..."

"You can move 'em by picking them up with a hand, so anything that is in the way you can move off, how 'bout to the bottom right?"

"Ah-uhm, let me see, let me see a moment... what is this?"

I tried picking up the piece of stick with gradations that stood right in front of me.

It was like a transparent pipe, and inside it was filled with a green liquid.

"That's the time remaining gauge. In short the time before you wake up. One gradation means one hour. It gradually empties even if you do nothing."

"Uh-huh."

"This is a dreamworld, so there's no concept of 'life'. If you die you'll wake up, and if you take physical damage the remaining time will sharply decrease."

I could readily accept that. I see, that was the theory behind how you would wake up if you fell down in a dream.

By the way, this gauge was linked to a green cube.

To wake up one could also use the app to log out, but the way to do that was to squeeze out the lumpy cube with a hand. ...no, I really did not care for playfulness of that sort.

Among the other apps that I had installed were a map of the area app, an app to teleport immediately to any spot you had already been, a telephone app, and many, many more.

"We come equipped with a great big mess of systems, I see..."

"She was also here, you know, that YoungMama. I didn't speak to her, but I did saw her walking about."

"What did you say?"

Would that not mean that she has been using sleeping medicine despite being pregnant?

"I didn't see wrong. She was definitely here, OK? Looked like she was just wandering about. Her belly was flat, so I guess fetuses don't count in the dream. That's why she was all carefree in here."

This was not a joke.

"Where did you see her?"

I found YoungMama right away.

She was leisurely eating at The Food Court (what a trendy name...) on her feet, meandering about.

"Hey, you!"

"Eeek... ah, is that you? You missed the three days of the Manchu-han Imperial Feast."

"Please do not walk about with that in hand like it was nothing."

"But come on, it's made to be held in hand."

"...uhm, you did take some sleep medicine, right?"

"I g-, guess I did, I took some? What did I do, I don't remember..."

"Do you believe a woman should take medicine during pregnancy!"

YoungMama squared her shoulders like a peeved child.

"...it's fine once in a while. It even delays the delivery date."

"That is no good! We must act like your labor contractions may begin at any moment. The day of delivery has passed, you know?"

"So it has... I'll be more careful from now on..."

She saw that while averting her eyes.

...I had to be attentive here, anyone seeing this would realize that.

And also that a normal lecturing was not going to work, either.

"Is it fun being here?"

And so I changed the subject.

"So-so, I guess. I'm happy that it can distract me, yes."

"Distract you, you say..."

Though indirectly, that clearly indicated that she felt depressed.

"...you are trying to run away from things..."

Although I found it frequent enough, having a person about to become a mother have that mentality made me savor an exhaustion such that it was like my bones had been yanked out.

"C-, come now, it's just for today. Just for today, see! Look, you sleep at night no matter what.

I just wanted to make some a good use of that. After all, I'm all alone even when I'm awake.

It's really hard, it is. Even now we don't know if the doctors will come again, and the baby too, maybe she will be born, maybe she won't..."

As I listened to those words laced with excuses I recalled a thing that had been bothering me, which was how her belly got a downsize.

"Could it be that the mayor is somewhere in here?"

I asked a stall, where the owner said, "if you taste our drinks I'll tell you."

Everybody was riding high, on board with the festival mood, which made me irritated, but I endured and answered yes. Their special made drink or whatever they called it was an amber liquid, poured spectacularly into a high-class antique glass in the shape of a butterfly with its wings spread.

"Been hard to make it taste like this. Just 'cause it's a dream it don't mean that you'll automatically get the best stuff. It needs trial and error, just like with real-world ingredients. Especially this one, it's got some secret effects. This thing here is totally gonna send you flying!"

Must be some moonshine, I thought as I tried swallowing some, then right on the spot I rapidly ascended by three hundred meters towards the heavens, remained airborne for just an instant, then rapidly descended at the same speed.

I did not even have the time to utter anything.

"Wow, you really flew up high! That might be the top score as of now! How was the flavor?"

I forgot all about the flavor from the surprise.

Before my eyes the words *Currently registered jump... 307 meters!* appeared, but I swiped them away.

"T-, this thing... when it is drunk it adds an application software, does it?"

"So you did notice. Do you know about computer viruses? It's all right, it's not an app that does anything bad. It's a game, lady, just a game. If you like it, make sure to give it a *Like* in the app marketplace."

He ought not be making people just up and drink that without some warning.

That was a crime, indeed, true as the world was the world...

"...where is the mayor... tell me or I'll give you a *Dislike*."

"That would be a problem for us... yeah, the mayor, he was in the UN Office of Whaveteration. I heard that the restaurant there was good. And I have it that he's been drinking and eating all day long."

The Office of Mediation, of all places...

The mayor, who was dressed up in a Louis the 133th, was watching a swordfight match at the Colosseum (the Office had been taken over) as he cut up a steak big as a brick. That table already had a dozen empty plates on it.

I of course barged in.

"N-, no, in the beginning my objective was just to check out the rumors, that's all! Look at the time. I acknowledge that being this profligate is bad, all right? However, once I thought carefully about it I changed my mind, this is after all just a dream. I asked myself, well well, what do you think you're doing now, bringing the standards of reality into a dream? Besides, go on, have a look! I can eat this steak and it'll have no impact on my health. My full stomach automatically returns to being empty. Think of it like eating until full, then vomiting, then eating again on that empty stomach. What was it Roman? Roman style! It could really be said to be a cultural thing, doesn't it? Right, it's cultural, I say, cultural. Auto-emesis, see. Hah hah hah... why are you making eyes that scary?"

Mine were not eyes of anger, they were the eyes of disgust.

"You talk like you have nothing to do, but you do, and plenty..."

"But we got aid, and enough of it to fulfill a lifestyle like the one we've had so far, right?"

"The aid will eventually be cut off!"

"Then we're gonna have to work, but... on the other hand, we can say that we can heal our hearts leisurely until then, can't we now? Besides, dream technology can contribute to our future development!"

I did hear that as a valid argument, but the mayor's faltering attitude vividly showed me the true reality of what he meant.

"There are multiple problems," and though I felt fatigued I continued my words out of a sense of duty. "Is it not a bad thing that a sleeping medicine is required to come here? At a glance I saw several children."

"...hmmm, that's true right there. Well then, let's do it like this. I'll forbid children from coming into the dream."

That was not a comprehensive solution!

And he was obviously in no mood to make one.

"Is it that much fun? All of this?"

"It's amazing, isn't it!," and the mayor leaned forwards to explain with vigor. "This is on a different level than toys like holograms! It's a dream-like dream! You feel like you have a body. Things are delicious. Better yet, it's free from any constraints! Myself I can't make applications, but others make all sort of good ones for us. The lost glitter of civilization is here!"

"But it is a dream! This is not nutritive! At night people ought sleep soundly!"

"That it's not nutritive is a good thing!"

Suddenly the mayor stood up in a display of anger, grabbed the brick-size steak that was still sizzling on the iron board and held it up high as he shouted this.



"I will not give up my dream, not even dead!"

"How did it go?"

"It did not go."

"As expected."

Y, who rejoined me at the drinking area, cackled as she made a face like she had predicted everything.

I took a drink identical to hers from the counter and sat down on the stool next to hers.

Inside was dream carbonated water which never lost its fizziness. That was all there was. But if I had to say one of the things that I honestly liked in this world, it was this.

"...he wants to eat them so much... steaks, I mean..."

"Ahhh, who?"

"Mister mayor."

"I have it that the guy got diabetes. Probably revenge for his restricted diet, right."

"This is a world of unrestrained desires..."

How Y managed to preserve her cool-headedness was itself a mystery. I asked her that honestly and,

"Well, see, I count among the organizers, so maybe I just take the initiative more. But by the time I realized all this existed it was already popular, and I just couldn't help but be frustrated by that. I just got one single ride before it got popular, see."

That fit her standard of values, I supposed.

"This drinking area, for one, I put a protection on it so that it will be preserved identical to reality. Doing that means not many people will come, so I can relax."

"Uh-huh. And what about that Alway?"

"It's Our Way. That one's gone now. It slipped fully from my hands and ended up managed by the public."

She said that with an implied slumping of shoulders. I see, the cause of this attitude of hers so like carbonated water that had lost fizz plausibly laid in that.

"It's a terrible thing, you know, a story without controlled rails. The backers of the popular couple have fun, but those that aren't begin to do something like sabotage, making the characters that are less focused on act on a consensus of who to hate, sending the story

spiraling into disarray. Right now it's 18+ only, seriously, 18+ only. And nobody's doing any bowling."

"...18+ only."

"Though it's amazing how much support it has, it's certainly taught me something."

"...18+ only."

Mixed in with groups of real-life people, the 3D anime characters walked around the Village like they owned the place, and it appeared that occasionally things took a bent towards being 18+ only, then. They served their galleries and their large numbers.

"An' that bein' said, looks like this episode will be the end of it."

"There is something that bothers me, have all of them been sleeping during daytime?"

"They have. Gotta explain that to you, too."

Y put back her work face and spoke matter-of-factly.

"The apps of this world, think of them as being able to freely tweak what was originally an unconscious dream that was impossible to manipulate. For example, someone makes an app to manipulate our dear moon, making it into floral patterns. Up to here that's simple. As long as no one minds, the moon will remain patterned. But if 99 people saw it and disliked the floral pattern, preferring a tribal pattern, what is decided by the majority will overwrite it. At that point the app will have been hacked by the collective will, and even the creator won't be able to do anything about it anymore. They could try going back-and-forth with that if they made a new app, though."

Just sharing a dream via Rakukko Picolin meant that they would only be able to be in the world as it was, of course. Even if everyone wished hard and caused changes, things still would not go entirely as they wanted.

What complicated the situation was the existence of the augmented reality masks which, when brought into the dream, came to allow an accurate initial manipulation. Only much later did the decision by majority cause the unconscious twisting of those, but this was simple and fast compared to a reality where making anything required time and effort, and most importantly it had this element of surprise in how things did not always go as one wished.

That made it understandable why the world of dreams held so many people prisoner.

There were also bizarre and fantastic changes that one could control to a certain extent.

Fantastical changes were based on the wishes of the majority, in other words, they were changes that pleased the numerical majority of people.

"An' so, being a dream, the majority of objects... meaning houses, stones, the moon, all things considered things... all of them can be manipulated. Except physical human bodies, of course, maybe it's how each of them has their own will or maybe they got some level of resistance, regardless those can't be made to yield to outside influences."

"So the Power of the Tyranny of the Majority... ah, nothing. Ahem ahem. So the Power of Friendship cannot kill other people, correct?"

"Just being in a dream makes your true nature just seep right out, huh. Watch out for that.

...so, well, it's as you say. Even striking directly with one's hand is useless. Punch all ya like, but no one's getting injured. Guess we could call this immortality."

"Hm-hum-hm."

"By the way, there's been one exception. That might be a problem, so I better tell you about it."

What Y explained was preposterous.

"It seems that an app has been made that allows manipulating one's own real body in reality from the dream."

"What? What did you just say?"

"Soon they will be able to make apps that allow manipulation of the body in reality while remaining in the dream."

"They cannot!"

"They can and do. Using a physiological phenomenon or something as trigger they can pull tricks, like for example getting up and eating something when feeling dizzy from hunger, or going to the toilet. They can only manage simple things in a state of moving about while asleep, it's not that inexplicable, see."

"That is ridiculous... with that they would be able to become permanent residents of the dream, would they?"

"S'far as the theory goes. But don't go be worried by that. Those people'll just make whatever sacrifice for the sake of the dream."

"This place fits under the category of certain death by pleasure, does it not."

Just like the fairies when they go fully rampaging on something.

I of course could not stand there and watch.

As I could not rely on the influence of the Village mayor, what I could do was limited. I decided to seize and impound the sleeping medicine.

I hurried to the tent where the RP was being distributed.

Do you remember the black suits from the previous story?

With K-san as intermediary I was able to dispatch several people. Sunglasses on dark suit, and best yet a pistol! There was nothing more reliable than this (but evaluating the more unlikely possibilities I had them not load their guns).

"This is more than a little troubling! On whose authority are you doing this!"

"The UN's."

I shoved a document right before the gatekeepers.

On it there was written, roughly, "The United Nations has the right and obligation to take coercive nonmilitary measures against threats to the peace from the perspective of cultural preservation against cooperative groups in the nation or that have the nation as their parent organization, and boy does that mean we're gonna ransack your place!"

I could make up documents like that one because I was a formal employee of the Office of Mediation. How I just pulled the text from past documents and loosely adapted it was to be kept secret.

We stepped into the tent and seized a massive amount of prepared RP.

Thanks to the presence of the black suits, no one stood in my way.

Furthermore, I could question the girl who distributed the medicine and had her lead me to the place of manufacture.

And it was, what else, in the dream world.

"In here?"

Yes, nodded the despondent girl. Where she had taken us was a plain log cabin in the middle of the weeds right outside town.

"Is this a building that also exists in the real world?"

K-san, who was not a local, asked this of me.

"Yes. No one is presently using it, however I believe it to be an old farming tool shed."

K-san, gun in hand, slowly stepped into the shed, and I behind her.

And when we did we found that something preposterous was taking place!



"Ahhh, well-come!" "It's the usual master humans!" "There she comes!" "While!" "Been a while!" "What do you need today?"

We found farmer-styled fairies who were, to a one, preparing the medicine.

"It's a medicine the fairies make, so... well, I sort of thought it would be like this."

"Is it a bad thing if we do?"

"Well..."

Next to the cabin's wall there was a massive number of plants bundled into sheafs and piled up until they neared the ceiling.

There were desks laid side by side, and on them the fairies were beating with the grass with pestles and spreading it with rolling pins. I did not get much of a feeling that they were preparing a medicinal drug, however that was just the way the fairies did things.

"Ah, these plant, they're all that creepy grass that's growing wild just outside."

As proof, they disintegrated as soon as I touched them.

"Because it uses grass of the world of dreams, the result of the analysis remains inconclusive."

"It's because they're parallel plants!"

"Parallel plants... right. You fairies can touch them, I see."

"We mastered the trick?"

Being that it was the stuff of dreams which we could not even touch, seizure and impounding was impossible. After all, the plants grew right outside.

"Are we under arrest?" "Arroast!" "I only came by accident, just this once!" "I was waiting for this!" "Didn't we, it was expectable, right?"

They put handcuffs on by themselves.

"Arrested, arrested!" "That's a good start!" "Weee!" "Doesn't doing that mean we're slaves?"

"It's a good day to get arrested?" "Can't say it isn't!"

And they were happy about it.

"Arresting you is, hum... well, I guess we can do that."

I would have just brought them back to my house.

"Awesome!," was one of the many cheers for joy shouted by the fairies as I stuffed them in my pockets.

"Awww, and I worked so hard to tame and scout them..."

The young girl collapsed to the ground in tears.

"Excuse me sensei, but I have a question," went K-san as she had taken the box of Rakukko Picolin that was already prepared and split into bags. "How can a medicine made in the world of dreams be taken back to reality?"

As she asked that, this is how the fairies went.

"Put it in your underwear!" "Act like it's flour?" "Give bribes?" "Trick the dogs with bones?"

"This is not about extremely old-fashioned ways of smuggling. What do you do to take these from the dream into reality?"

"Well, once the medicine is done here, it appears on its own in reality. We just recover it," confessed the girl without opposition.

"...one cannot bring items from the dream into reality, is what I would like to say at this point, so I believe that what the fairies are doing must take quite some skill. Let us not think about it."

"Waaah, we're treated like we're special!" "And they even arrested us!" "I'm so happy we got a job here!"

"First of all, why did you decide to take this job?"

"...because it's hard to find jobs?"

That was true, now that he said it.

As humans became able to solve their many problems by themselves, the fairies fell into a recession.

Going forwards we ought not think about things such as independence or self-reliance, and just freely rely on them instead, all right?

And with this the supply of Rakukko Picolin had stopped, and I thought that the affair of the augmented dream was over.

"What a refreshing morning."

I woke up early in the morning feeling well.

The Village had been calmness itself since then.

For its own the rebuilding had not yet progressed, but in its stead there were no people losing themselves in a dream, and someday, the days spent walking on this earth will make everyone feel good once more.

Everybody woke up regularly, lived regularly, and slept regularly.

Except their behavior lacked a single thread out of place, making it like well-practiced troops, or robots with all the same exact programming!

"...oh dear?"

A scoundrel was going about.

The scoundrel was going back and forth about the tent city in the early morning, making the tents' door flap open without even knocking. But that was her job.

Flap!

"Good morning. What a nice weather we have."

Flap!

"Good morning. What nice weather."

Flap!

"Good morning. Nice weather we got."

Flap!

"Good morning. What a nice weather we have."

Flap open tent after tent, it was like this everywhere.

Everyone who put out one of these template answers was, without exception, wearing a mask.

Every once in a while she startled a non-masked one into a *"bwah, oh, who's there?"*, but she did not care.

An emergency situation, silent and deep, was in progress.

Flap!

"Good morning. What a nice weather we have."

Whoops, that was K-san. Do not confuse me...

"Good morning, ma'am. What are you doing?"

"Good morning, PocMon. My job. You came at the right moment, I need a favor."

"We were about to do our morning walk, however..."

"...carefree for being mere material."

"Aren't you material as well?"

So I was. We were fellow material beings.

I inquired PocMon as to whether she could investigate the percentage of people that, at

present, were inside the augmented dream.

I put as premise how we did not understand much about the augmented dream, but supposed it existed, and she answered.

"Just wearing the mask doesn't fulfill the terms, right? They might be awake and using the masks. Therefore, we must think that someone in the augmented dream is wearing the mask and furthermore is asleep."

"I see, even if we can tell the number of masks in use, you cannot tell whether those wearing them are asleep, PocMon."

"No, I can tell. I can monitor the breathing from the masks' sensors and, while with low precision, I can inspect the electric exchanges inside the brain. I have it that during REM sleep there is ocular movement, and I can perceive that as well. Using this data... well, there are differences in the individuals, so it won't be perfect. But it's not impossible."

"Hearing that makes those masks sound like spying devices."

"What's that at this point LOL. That's natural, isn't it? Devices like these, which have high affinity for this kind of users, are all sort of like spying machines. Best yet, yours truly is system manager and simultaneously the provider."

"And personal information?"

"I have as much as you please!"

I sort of thought that having only morals be in decline was perhaps a bad thing.

But on that I will be doing my best starting tomorrow, there you go.

"Then can I ask you to do it on the double?"

"Precision won't be high, so I'll reduce measurement error by performing an iterative search. This will take some time, is ten times enough?"

"Go on."

A hourglass sign appeared on PocMon's body, which then began spinning round and round. Twenty-two minutes passed like that.

I sat down on a short wall, smothered a yawn in my mouth and tried to focus on my job when a preposterous scene began unfolding before my eyes.

There were zombies.

An army of zombies like those featured in old movies had appeared.

The zombies exited their tents at the exact same time, reached the street in the exact same manner, and began walking in scattered directions.

They were all wearing masks.

Where they were headed varied, the toilets, the watering place, or the kitchen, so there was some difference, but at the worst moments, there were people moving with precisely the same walking motions and timing. Human eyes by themselves caught their unnaturalness quite sharply.

It was bizarre.

"I'm alll dooone!"

PocMon finished her investigation right then.

"W-, what is the percentage?"

"Roughly... 78 percent."

"Seventy...!"

The essence of Kusunoki Village was pretty much in the dream side.

They had moved there.

"Odd. The sleeping medicine has been prohibited, I believe... how?"

Once people fulfilled their biological functions by going to the toilet and eating, they turned

into mere creatures that sluggishly prowled about with their masks on. Although when encountered on the road they managed a greeting, their attitude was as unnatural as if they were reading flat from a script, there was no emotion in it. ...were there other ways to procure Rakukko Picolin? I could not think of anything except for that. And as I was lost in my direction, YoungMama came to visit me. "Hey, what is it? You don't look in a good mood." "Ah, it is you... I am a bit at a loss with matters related to my work. How are you?" "As you can see my belly doesn't really look 40w, not at all. No labor pains, of course, no stretching and no fetal movement. So she was forty weeks in. "...the doctors... we absolutely must bring them back again." I too had an emergency situation, so there was not a moment to lose. Normally, so long as the health care system was in order she would have many avenues left to try. No matter how much of an individual difference there was, pregnancy could not be made to last past the fiftieth week. Ahhh, still, I had not found a pediatrician— "It's fine. At this point, I just feel like this baby won't ever be born." She smiled sadly as she looked at my face. Within that innocent, childlike smile it was as if the heart became bare, and treading into the matter behind it required courage. "...she has to be born. Not only did you divorce for that silly a reason, but you are doing the same to the baby, truly!" I felt opposed to cutting ties that cleanly and easily. Except her eyes moistened. "...you're right." She hung her head. "One thing." "Of course." "The reason you separated from this child's father was a lie." "That... why would it be a lie?" "You did it because you were told he did not want to become a father, that is why." Not finding the words to say to someone does happen, indeed. But falling silent conversely gave her a chance to talk to me. "He's young, so he still can't, not yet, he said. The reason changed on the way many times, but... well, to sum it up, I think he just didn't want to. Either abort or we part ways, so... I thought much over it, on that choice, and this is how it ended." "So that was what happened." "However, once done... something was off somewhere. She would just not grow properly. I asked the doctors, but they said they weren't experts and didn't know, so I pushed and had them check me up and all that, but... I wasn't all that kind. I got more and more fed up." I believed this had been around when the big event happened. That brouhaha about the monument, I mean. "Sorry." "For the lack of doctors? You did your very best, it's all right. And I'm happy that you stood by my side."

"You do not need to put it in the past tense. It is not done yet."

"But... there's nothing else left to try, is there? Giving birth without doctors, really, I don't want that. And I don't have anyone left as far as family."

"There are still two things left to try."

"...which are?"

Exactly, there were still only two ways left.

One among them was an excessively excessive way. It was so nasty that even I required quite the resolve about it.

"Is that true? There's really things left to try?"

"One is a definitive solution that I would not wish to use, if possible, but it is there. I just do not want to use it."

YoungMama burst into a laugh.

"I don't get what you mean."

"The other is a solution that I may call a trump card. I would advise this one."

"The second plan, right? Which one is it?"

"Make her *poof* and be born using the magical power of the fairies."

She laughed with her mouth open wide.

...a laugh like she did not believe me, right.

"I can assure perfect safety."

She held her belly as she laughed even harder.

"...sure, feel free to laugh, but please do not place any burdens on your belly."

"Haaah, I laughed so much. It's been a while since I last did. Laughing makes your mood better, it does."

She said that with her voice still shivering from the aftermath of the laugh.

"Since you are so bold as to tell me this, then I'll do my best for a little while longer."

"Please inform me right away should labor pains start, all right?"

"Mmmh, and how? If waters break I don't think I'll be able to move anymore."

I had my augmented reality mask pinched in between two fingers and wordlessly wore it with the magnificence of that great person at that one event.

"Ah, I can just use that? You were so angry that I didn't use it anymore."

"So long as you do not add the sleeping medicine I do not mind."

Though, since that medicine was of fairy make, there were likely no ill effects, of course.

"So, what do I do with the mask?"

"There should be a communication app, one for use in the real world. Please install it."

"The one with the R on it? Or the one without?"

"The one with."

I taught her how to use it, had her add my number and give it a test.

"Ah, amazing! I can hear your voice even if we are far away."

"...but being in the real world means the interference is terrible. Maybe it is the conduction via bones?"

"What, but that is good enough, you know?"

Well, as long as we understood one another...

And then, when she entered my field of view with the mask on, I was petrified.

Around YoungMama was that parallel grass that I believed grew nowhere but the dream world, looking like a ring growing around her.



"...?!"

I took off the mask.

I could no longer see the parallel grass.

I wore them again. I could see the parallel grass.

"What is it? You're acting like that guy who thinks he's so cool by taking their sunglasses on and off, you know?"

That grass grew in an instant. YoungMama took one step and, with a little delay, the grass spurted out like mushrooms from the ground.

And then the parallel grass that had become far from YoungMama-san became particles as it pulverized, taken away out towards the Village.

"THEY ARE COMING IN?!"

The parallel plants were coming in of their own power.

Later after that, I asked privately to the fairies about the parallel grass.

It was a hard task to summarize their peculiar phrasing, but I was able to translate it.

According to them, parallel plants were a something that was only seen as a plant.

It lived in the space between dream and reality, they said.

They said they were "incorporeal", unable to be imprisoned by material limitations, something completely similar yet completely different from real types of plants.

They eluded perception. Some could be photographed, but could not be seen by the naked eye. Other kinds ignored the laws of distance, and whether close or far away they appeared to be the same size. The things did not lay their being to the flow of time, they floated within an illusion of the dark of the night.

They could neither be touched nor perceived by humans. The only ones who could carry them as ingredients from the world of dreams to our own were the fairies.

But, at present, they were leaking into the real world on their own.

Theirs had been a long journey, one likely in search of a warm, lit garden.

And, for some reason, they found it only around YoungMama.

Y, K-san, Assistant-san and I plus our subordinates, a total of about ten people, logged into the dream world.

"...now then, everybody, please take this appliment."

I poured two drops of the new app into each member's hand.

That application + supplement portmanteau meant a dose-based app.

Despite being the same program, their effect was much more powerful compared to the

download version. This method was still unknown to all except for us, and it was incredibly effective. ...against other users.

The reason why it was stronger was, actually, unknown.

It was simply a fact discovered by accident in tests after development.

To guess, rather than pulling out touch panels in one's sights and downloading things left and right, dosing was more intuitive. The reason, in short, was because this was a dream.

The effects appeared immediately.

"Oh, this is nice," Y's voice burst out.

We were all instantly clad in battle uniforms with weapons.

"Rifle and handgun. There are also hand grenades, I see."

A knitting needle and wool, there is also a pattern for knitting, I see, might have been what K-san had said in that calm and collected manner as she inspected the weapons one after another.

"..."

Assistant-san was of few words, however his cheeks blushed, and it could be perfectly understood that his motivation had risen.

"Huuuh, I don't know much about all this stuff, but the theory is that you normally use the long pistol, and the normal pistol only when needed. Grenades are individual choice."

"Do not call it a 'long pistol'. Boots are not 'long shoes'. ...it is a rifle."

Grandfather would have known more, of course.

"The number of rounds you can fire is unlimited. Also, as it is this world's rule, if enough people think that we should go away there is a possibility that the power of that majority will make it difficult for us to act, so I would caution against being noticed."

"There's a protection, right?"

"Correct. A tiny bit of attention is not going to be a problem. However there is a limit, and if you find that your equipment keeps degrading no matter what you do, please take another appliment. Anyone with questions?"

"Uhm... how come our weapons are ornate rococo designs?"

One of the staff raised his hand and asked that.

"I thought that just maybe it would soften the impression."

An unspeakable silence fell.

"Ahem. So if there is nothing else, I would really like to get things started now."

"Then, just as planned, we will attack the north."

K-san and her black suited people, being this was more or less their main job, took over the more spacious northern area of the Village.

"And we take south."

Y was spearheading the girls who were fans of the bishonen bowling.

All of them had glassy eyes and were terrifying.

"These girls didn't get the coupling they wanted and seem to want to destroy everything, so they make for reassuring allies, see," was how Y gave them her seal of approval.

With these two teams we could cover the entirety of the people of the Village, while I meant for myself and Assistant-san to be a wandering control tower, issuing orders as we fired pistol shots.

"Still, dream or not, I feel sort of guilty at shooting people dead."

Y said something rational.

"This is not shooting anyone dead. Once shot their gauges will go to zero and they will wake up, so... it is shooting them awake."

Residents turning into zombies was no good, no good at all.
The recovery support aid was soon to come to an end.
Parallel plants were coming to our side and I had no idea what was going to happen next.
There were many other reasons, but regardless, at least for the time being I judged this world as needing to be sealed away in its entirety.
For the sake of preventing the Village from being destroyed I was going to become a demon.
The staffers I saw with eyes awaiting the final order.
Even as I faltered, thinking that doing this was no small feat, I did my duty and declared this calmly.
"Ehhh guuuyys! Now then, we begin Operation: Complete Driving Away of the Illegal Users of the Augmented Dream, all riiight. Eih eih ohhh!"
Eih eih ohhh! Their voices came as one.

"Hyh-, hyyyh!"

The old lady was so afraid she did not know where to run, so I shot her in the back with the long pistol and killed... no, saved her (in the sense that I extracted her from within this addictive dream).

One shot and her activity limit gauge went *zwooom* down, hit zero, and the empty cube exploded in pieces, with the old lady turning into viscous liquid and vanishing. That was the visual effect for logging out.

Also, as a function of the appliment's search functionality, we could easily see the opponents' gauges and other parameters.

"Sensei! We're fifty percent clear here!"

"Thank you! Please continue as you are doing!"

Simultaneously with K-san's reply I held the pistol and pulled the trigger.

The bullet pierced a something alongside the youth who was hiding behind it, erasing both of them.

Assistant-san too, right next to me shot... awake a few older men who were petrified and shivering.

"...it feels like we are doing something cruel for some reason."

Perhaps I ought not have used guns, but swords and magic?

I felt that slaying people with blades would have been much more brutal, however...

The ward in which Assistant-san and I were had nothing but a small number of residents who had fled there, but it was still a pretty number of people to... eh, what was it... to rescue.

It was a minor and irrelevant thing, however even saying 'rescue' was a tremendously nasty thing for a person to think.

"No matter where you go, the mask will make it obvious."

This app also had a scouting functions. I could easily tell where the residents wearing masks were.

"Why yooou! You UN lapdooooogs!"

One male dashed madly at us with a nata in hand.

I restrained Assistant-san and the gun he had ready and waited.

After letting him come close until the last moment I nimbly readied the long pistol and made the toughest of smiles, making his forehead go ba-boom.

I apologize. It was fun, doing this...

It was not death, so there was no body. And it was necessary. I would like that to be taken under consideration as you evaluate this, so please find it in yourselves to not be disgusted.

And as I thus confessed my repentance I pulled the trigger and shot another one awake.
"...it appears this has cleared the area, one way or another."

Assistant-san nodded with a satisfied face.

The clearing out of other areas seemed to be also proceeding well. There were nearly no residents currently left in the dream world.

Assistant-san whispered something at me in my ear.

"Eh? If the parallel plants are growing in reality then this is no more than a stopgap measure?

I did think about that! Once the clearing out is done, I will deploy the Kaijuu-Model Program."

Then, if possible, I wanted to extirpate all parallel plants from the roots.

It could have been said that somewhere in this world there was a something that linked back to YoungMama-san.

"North area is all clear."

The report came from K-san without delay.

And after some more time,

"Oooi, south area's all clear. Did we mebbe lose to the north team?"

I ordered both teams to return home and set the building objects to transparent, becoming able to examine my surroundings in a single sweep.

There was a girl.

Though I believed her to be far beyond the road at a distance of several kilometers, the girl ignored the laws of distance and the sensation of her presence made her feel like she was standing right before my eyes.

With this, it was the third time I had seen her.

"Is she..."

Assistant-san discovered the girl where my gaze was pointed and he pointed a gun at her.

There was no text stating the mask's serial number.

I could not help uttering this with a shivering voice.

This was no human.

Right, there was no serial number. She was not someone who was sleeping while wearing a mask.

But I could not tell whether she was human.

Her figure was like a queen to the fairies. Beautiful Titania.

That was the image given to her by me.

Her real figure was as yet undetermined.

After all, that girl came walking here from the vast world outside the Village. And she brought parallel plants with her.

Right, she brought them with her.

They grew where she had been walking.

That girl, the one who even her face was hard to determine, definitely resembled her.

"Do not shoot now. I believe these weapons will become real guns if turned against her."

Assistant-san drew back and I tossed my own weapon.

"You have been alone all this time, have you not?"

I bent forwards and offered my hand. I instinctively wanted to put her at ease.

"You do not understand who you are, correct?"

I too had realized the truth of her just a few moments before.

"You searched for light, that was why you drew close to here, right?"

Anyone would go that far for the same reason, perhaps.

Even Grandfather, even I, even everyone else, without doubt.

"Properly speaking, we should never have created a human village on this side of a dream, you see."

Right where she was going towards there was a strong light pouring down and out, and seeing that scene for the first time would have startled her... so she came to a standstill. She had gone past the fortieth week.

Given these conditions, the answer to be drawn was just one.

Suddenly, the world grew darker. Because people had disappeared, the light filtering in from beyond was being lost, of course. This was how it had been from the beginning.

What bound this world of darkness with the other side was, originally, nothing more than a tiny gap.

When someone was having a dream, for example.

When someone was being born, for example.

Special times like those managed to create a small connection between this and the other side.

"Come, this way. This way, please... Ah, Assistant-san, you can log out ahead of me if you wish."

He shook his head.

Looks like he wanted to stick around until the end. Occasionally he could be a firm young man.

I activated the conversation app.

"...ngggh... I was sleeping, what is it~?"

She answered with a sleepy voice.

"Please call out to her."

"What's that out of nowhere? Call out, who to?"

"To your baby."

"Eh? ...what do you mean... call out to her? You really want me to do it?"

"Do it!"

I switched to speakerphone so the girl could hear as well.

"...uhm... then. ...sa~y, won't you come out? If you keep going like this time will pass and you'll never be able to be bo~rn. Come out already~. Being alone is sa~d."

The girl shivered with a start.

She took one step forwards, heading our way.

The world became even darker as a number of different apps controlling things lost their functionality.

After all, this world could neither be created nor maintained without the consent of a majority. While it was contracting, the center of the Village attracted the young girl. As the darkness became more intense, the little girl started running... but of course, should she have clung to me, things might become more problematic...

"We have to go back now. But do not misunderstand, all right? Just go to where you originally had to go, could you? Just continue towards that tiny little light, OK?"

I eyed Assistant-san. We logged out simultaneously.

And then—

I woke up on my bed.

The mask received an aggressive call signal.

In its normal mode.

"Yes! It is I!"

"I-, it hurts... just suddenly, a little while ago... it started hurting... what is this?"

It was YoungMama-san.

Though I did foresee this, on the spot I reflexively froze in body and thought both.

But I had to move.

"I a-, am coming right away!"

I rushed out of the tent, quickly sticking back the mask as it had half-peeled off. I was headed for YoungMama's tent.

Meanwhile I contacted everyone and told them about the situation.

Y, K-san, and Assistant-san were all going to come running.

Also, PocMon was there.

Worried I groped around my breast pocket, checking that the hard tactile sensation of the monolith was there.

What a relief. With this we can get something done, perhaps.

If we did not, then what?

...but there was something we could do... right?

YoungMama-san left with a stumble the tent in which she lodged, then squatted at the side of the street.

"Keep it together!"

I rushed over and hugged her shoulders.

YoungMama-san was looking up at me with a pale face. Her unbound hair was so soaked in sweat it looked like she was wearing water itself on her head.

I could tell that her sleepwear was a little moist.

"...it hurts... it hurts sooo much... these, might be, labor pailins..."

Her voice was half like an animal's.

"Uhm, what did you do at times like this? I thought... I read it in a book...!"

Within my head, blank.

Though it was urgent, I could not find what I had to do.

It was expectable. I had no experience in how to act, certainly not as midwife.

I could only stand by and look as the mother and her child met with danger.

However.

First of all, a Mediator had a duty to act as an intermediary between different species.

Second, I had to myself some of the wisdom and skills required to help people.

Third, I had to fulfill the promise I made to her.

And, of course, I could not stand there without thinking now that push had come to shove. I knew I was the type to run away from responsibilities I could not take.

But this responsibility I bore on my shoulders.

"It is all right. Remember the promise we made back then?"

"Ngggh..."

She was clenching her teeth so hard that she could not answer properly.

I took PocMon out of my breast pocket. Her support was now necessary.

However.

She was out of battery.

"What the, what the, what THE!!!"

Unforeseen.

This was a bad situation, one that nearly made me go beyond blanking and straight into panicking.

I just barely managed to regain my composure, telling myself that I still had aces in the hole. Right, I had one last possible mean to do this.

"...fairies, help me."

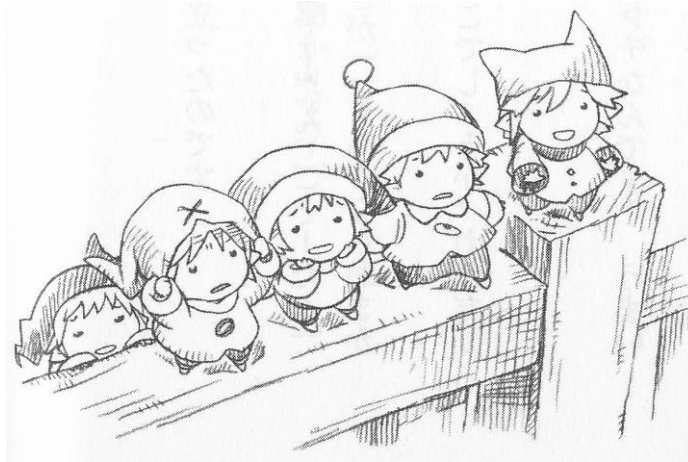
Mine was a voice in bits and pieces that was showing powerlessness.

This would not be heard by them.

"Fairies, help meee!"

"Oh-yee-es!"

I did not see where from but a voice came on, and the fairies stood in order on top of the fence.



And they numbered eight!

"We're re-employed!" "Banzaai!" "Are we in a recovery?" "Consultation time, a consultation!"

"This is where you leave it all to the skills of pros!" "The time has come, finally!" "Leave anything real to us!" "Eight thousandth time on toilet troubles!"

Flowers blossomed around them. It might be the reality augmentation proper of fairies. They had power to spare. That was the impression I got.

I pleaded to the fairies,

"Fairies, the baby of this lady is in danger! She is a breech birth, a difficult birth, and we are in a real bad situation! Please use your skills to help us! She is about to be born!"

I gave them eyes filled with expectations.

".....what?"

The fairies were repulsed.

I wanted to be the one to say that flat '*what*'.

"A birth...?" "Meaning she's gonna give birth?" "Congratulations?" "That's right!"

"Congratulations!" "Congrats!" "Waaah!" "Then it's around time for us to, well..."

They were about to leave.

"Wait! Wait! This is a real bad situation! I cannot deliver the baby of my own strength. And I told you, she is upside down! Can your fairy powers not help?!"

".....what?"

The eight fairies that were there instantly became five.

"P-, please do not decrease in number!"

Why, how?

"Agggh, it hu... AGGGGGGGH!"

YoungMama-san let out a conspicuously louder scream.

"....."

The fairies became three.

"I said do not decrease in number, seriouslyyy!"

Could it be that fairies were of no use at times like these?!

In a rebound from the sense of relief, a massive sense of unease leaned hard against my shoulders.

YoungMama was in so much pain that she grasped my arm and dug her nails in.

"Blood, what else..." "Blood..." "Erythrocytes..."

The fairies finally became just the one.

These guys were no use even with blood!

Having reached a situation with no possible avenue of action, I was thrust into a brave choice:

"Set your mind to it." "Stand by and observe."

They were not displayed, but those two choices were fluttering before my eyes.

There was no person I could rely upon, and still the baby was about to be born.

I fearfully took PocMon out of my pocket.

"Battery reads zero... but..."

I looked at the fairy.

"Mister fairy, you are fine with charging up, right!"

"Ah, yes! I am fine."

The fairy hastily rode on PocMon's shoulders. He rubbed his head with a desk pad. Promptly a fire lit inside PocMon's mono-eye.

"Thank you for sleeping in my pocket instead of in your charging base."

"I thought it more likely that you would see that my battery was out. ...so, what is the current situation?," she went.

If I could not borrow the power of the fairies, then I could only get something done with humans and those they commanded, be they family or servants.

"Heeey!"

The others belatedly all came running to me. It was reassuring.

"All right... PocMon, a super-urgent scan of the status of this person's breech birth. See if the child can be born naturally. Investigate the size of the baby's head, the diameter of the birth canal, things of that sort. This is super-urgent."

My mouth moved as if entirely separated from my thoughts.

"I'm sorry to report that the breech situation hasn't changed. It's medically safer to make a Cesarean. Still, vaginal delivery is not impossible."

PocMon answered that an instant later.

A list of what was necessary for the birth was projected on my sights.

Y, who had come nearer, groaned a "bwah..."

"One of you, we need hot water, lots of it. Also, search for a nearby house that we can use for the delivery!"

"Understood! Anything else?"

"Clean towels, and plenty!"

Y and K-san ran off.

"T-, this doesn't feel like it's gonna work, does it?"

YoungMama-san said that in a shivering voice.

"...there is nothing to do... the child must be given birth to."

"And you will help deliver her?"

"I will. There is nothing else to be done."

YoungMama-san made a sarcastic smile, she was in part giving up to all of this, but also being self-deprecating.

"Nothing else to be done, then... still, you have no experience, right? Are you actually ready for this?"

"Even without experience we have the data. Though it's from several hundred years or more ago."

"PocMon, let us prove augmented reality's usefulness."

"If we fail..."

"We will get capital punishment."

"Wow."

K-san shouted loud, going *this house looks goo-od*.

"So, can we move all the way there?"

"Im-, impossibleeee..."

"It's all right, ma'am, we still got about a minute."

That was just too short!

Assistant-san and I supported YoungMama-san's shoulders from both sides, allowing her to move.

The home was of sturdy build, even had a roof, and there was a nice and robust desk remaining inside. On the desk were sheets and pads ripped off from beddings all piled one over the other. Nice one, K-san!

We laid YoungMama on the table.

"Commencing data transmission," went PocMon.

A large amount of data that did not exist in the world of reality filled my sights. Room temperature. Parturient's temperature. A translucent map of the abdomen. I swept away the ones I did not need, ensuring that the other information was prioritized.

More data appeared. Tagged urgent. Location was deep within the parturient's groin area.

The augmented reality told me to check the uterus' orifice.

"Can you understand? I did try to make the interface as clean and possible."

"Yes, I can understand. Please continue. I am a newbie at this."

While piecing together ancient data, PocMon displayed matching search results, then compared and analyzed points in common and points in disagreement... the scene in my eyes was emphasized as if with florescent markers, burying away my hesitation.

Checking uterine orifice.

"It is open, so... she is about to be born. Assistant-san, can I ask you to be a midwife?"

He bit his lips... scared, was he... still, he nodded firmly.

Immediately after the augmented reality reported the breaking of the waters, water with quite the red to it made a stain the color of life on the sheets. So much water from a single human...

Assistant-san's face instantly drained of color as he witnessed the scene right before him.

"...this is not usual."

I said that with rare calmness, and he slumped over, having fainted.

...the shock was expectably too big, indeed. Even I, as a woman, found that this should have made me go *gyeek*.

However.

"..."

What spiritedness, his. He promptly and abruptly got up, squatted down firmly, and, with a face that said he knew the solution to every mystery of this world, briskly went to work.

"...splendid."

This may have been impertinent, but I found it a little entertaining.

"I have spare cloth and have already sterilized the scissors... to cut the umbilical cord with."

"Thank you!"

"I b-, brought the warm water! Should I put it in these bowls? Is it for drinking?"

"Like I would drink it!"

Calming myself, I washed my hands carefully in the hot water that had been poured in one of the bowls.

The parturient's life signs were displayed, and the countdown to the birth had begun.

Now then, now-then *now-then*.

I felt like the little girl was hesitating on the far side of a gloomy road.

Ah well. Even adults were feeling good on that side, indeed. Yes, a world where everything went as you wished was enticing.

But, like those parallel plants proved, light only existed here.

Becoming alive was quite a big problem, and no one was born by coincidence. Everybody aimed for something, to the point it became pressuring, and that made coincidence finally ascend into necessity. That, at least, was how it felt to me.

Everybody was here, the fairies as well.

And so, while it might become troublesome, it was going to be all right, perhaps.

The marker lost in the dream world had suddenly reappeared.

So, about Kusunoki after that.

Recovery had begun. At last, it felt like it had.

The support goods coming to a halt were an important cue. There was someone who petitioned for said halt. That was me.

It's your fault the Village was destroyed, right?, I was even told by the residents, *and that was precisely the reason why I took responsibility and stopped the aid*, I told back, and that made them leave their jaws slackened, speechless.

Everything else aside, people had to get off their backsides and start working for their food at long last.

At present, the Village was day by day regaining its previous form.

As for the dream world, it as predictable became a restricted area.

It was not merely lost, in later days it became subject of a thorough investigation.

Even what the fairies might be doing was on my mind, of course. It was just that... the VIP Boss expressed his interest, and I could only hope it would not become a problem, however.

Production of Rakukko Picolin had ceased completely, and the stock was under strict surveillance at our Office, so on that point we had reason to feel at ease.

As for YoungMama-san after that, both mother and child seemed to be in good health.

Sometimes she dropped by the temporary Office together with the baby.

Initially, *it a goblin?* we nearly went, she was so wrinkled, but day after day her skin became tighter and smoother, and now the baby was so adorable it honestly rivaled the fairies.

It was just that YoungMama-san was about to give her a name really unique, focused on the sound of it, shining brightly, and only fitting for someone very young, and between that and me saying she would do better to give her a proper name there often came verbal arguments. After all, I had delivered her, I did have the right to say that much. As for what the result of that was, well, I will let you imagine.

Physical development was extremely normal.

"But there's one thing that... well, scares me," she let out.

"Which is?"

"It's very seldom, but sometimes she moves things without touching them, or plays with something that I can't see, I keep wondering if she's going to be all right..."

"...if that is all then she is going to be all right. It will go away in time."

My experiences had me tell her that.

"Will she?"

"So long as she keeps living in this world."

As for the passionate fans of Our Way (that 3D anime about bowling), a percentage of them did not return to their hometowns after broadcast ended and instead remained in Kusunoki Village.

The cause, they said, was because they met someone else.

In short, they got along very well with the Village's younger ones and the excessive amount of free time they had.

About this, Y lamented *"I don't like this at all!"* with her fist held aloft.

And finally, what happened to that no-longer-useful augmented reality.

"Well now, you got skill at construction. How 'bout you transfer in?"

"Naaah, it's just 'cause I'm helping with making houses, see. My skills just improved without me even noticing, looks like."

"Your original job of wall painter maxed out at level fifteen, didn't it. That's definitely for the best. That construction skill raises to a max of ninety-five. There's a lot for you to learn."

"Right, that, that's right, that..."

"Say you, didn't you make a vegetable garden of late?"

"Sure, I have. See, well, when looked at with a mask, I found out that the nutritional level of the land was unexpectedly high. For the first time I felt that I needed to plant something or it would go to waste."

"How's that feel?"

"Right now, my cultivated field's level is seven. But my farming skill got to level nine. The level of plants I can cultivate is therefore an average of around five, right."

"Hah hah hah! With a five, the grain would still be very very small, wouldn't they. But you got diligence at least, boy. Once your crop's level passes forty-five, you will receive praise and your life will change, that's how this goes."

"Say, yesterday, while walking about... my walking level suddenly went up. Even walking has its own level, really... I'm astonished."

"For that, stamina and health parameters also increase little by little. Walking's, well, a pretty cheap skill."

And so, well, the skill level system had taken complete hold.

Thanks to the app data from augmented reality, abilities and skills that improved little by little in normal daily living became examinable in the form of parameters.

While they could not be edited freely as in the dream world, the people who realized how they

were capable of changing returned to the real world with quite the motivation.

Us as well, we nervously tried to examine our own skills.

"...huuuuh, this is it, then," went Y, not sounding particularly interested.

"...well, unexpected and more unexpected," went K-san, not hiding the fast throb of her heart.

".....," Assistant-san was seemingly incompatible with that app and could not see his own values.

So, as far as how it went for myself,

"How's it gone, o best friend of mine?"

With all too much familiarity Y hugged my shoulders.

Her real intent was to peek into the parameter screen, of course.

So as I quickly hid the mask,

"...well, I only have high skills into what I do not need, however, and the skills I wanted are all as one low."

"Skills you want, like what?"

"Like the cleanliness and culture appropriate to a maiden left abandoned in a secluded room."

Also, but I was not going to speak of them, the skills that would allow me to freely push people around.

Y said this with fixed eyes.

"You're still dreamin', you are."

"You will never understand how someone feels like when their 'adventurer' skill goes past fifty!"

I wondered what fate required of me.

I had to think things through with regards of my life going forwards, or so I felt.

First of all, I locked my own parameter screen so that people could not read it as a security measure.

By the way, these parameters could only be examined via augmented reality compatible devices (not just the masks) that anyone who moved in would freely receive.

Heartily recommended to those who wish for more stimulation in their daily lives.

Furthermore, though at this point it was out of proper order of importance, I was granted nothing less than a house. A brand-newly built house in the exact spot where I wanted it!

What about you, would you like one?

Which all meant that today too humanity was in its much-vaunted decline... or so I should have said, however...

"You got mail!"

"Ah-huh?"

A letter fluttered down to me as I was in a epiloguesque mind.

"Was there some matter that I forgot about, I wonder..."

I thought I had settled everything and neatly, however.

The instant I opened the letter I kicked off the chair as I stood bolt upright.

"...as for the currently undergoing retry of the Moon Travel Project, specifically the matter of the loss of contact with the shuttle partway through, we have long been working hard to resume contact, but on the Xth of ○ it was decided that the project would be canceled. We have no words to apologize to you aristocrats on the matter, furthermore..."

Aristocrats?

Who would they be?

To be continued

Fairy Memo - Rakukko Picolin

A sleeping medicine with quite the efficacy made for us by the fairies.

It's a miracle drug that guarantees sound sleep even if taken in small quantities .

As a bonus, and mysteriously, people who take this medicine can see each other in a dream.

It's just that rumors say that people's minds are interconnected to begin with, and there are people who say the medicine does no more than provide an outlet for that.

Incidentally, it seems that the ingredient for this medicine are extraordinarily bizarre parallel plants. Those plants, according to the fairies, are quite sociable plants called *exit is that-a-way*. Sociable, they say, what does that mean?

Normal sleeping medicine put a burden on the body so they should not be taken in large quantities, but this one seems OK in that regard.

But it's got to be tested a little bit more by our Office, so no taking it until then.

On nights when you just can't sleep, drink some warm milk or read a book on math.



Afterword

We have reached Heisei twenty-five².

That's a quarter of a century! Most surprising. I still vividly remember when the old man with the glasses wrote the kanji 平成 for 'Heisei' on the flip-board. Yeah, yeah, whatever, whatever. Among us old men, *"the Heisei-born are about to rise to power! LOL"* was a gag that meant something implausible, but now it's neither jest nor joke anymore. Also, the people born on the first year of Heisei will be twenty-five next year... they will be old men like us.

...I heard the rebuttal that said that that was the average age of people on the other side of the page who are interested in this, but I'm gonna ignore it. Say what you like, a twenty five years old's an old man. This is a line I will not yield on. Recall how you felt in elementary school. Then judge whether twenty-five years old's an old man or a young one. ...you get me, right? That's what I mean. Besides, I was called old man when I was twenty-five years old. And only you guys get to be an exception from that rule? No, I'm going to carry on the club's traditional hazing as a type of unbroken chain of misfortune for you all! Ain't that nice!

That all aside, time constantly drips along.

Indeed... time and the heart never know a moment's rest (future famous saying that I bequeath to the newer generations).

Now that I think about it, I've been writing for very long. Your humble storyteller is soon to pass his forties (and I do feel like an old writer who's taken on the years). When thinking I would become the mysterious being that a male past his forties is, I feel a fire lit in my heart. What I've reconsidered now that I'm this old is... errr... nothing, I guess?

Yup, nothing at all. Nothing whatsoever, to the point it surprises even me. No words pregnant with meaning and suitable to my age are coming to me. Thinking about it, I was never the type to change things about my character. But without repentance there's no growth, you see. As it looks like a writer's life is honestly appropriate for the sort of person I am, every day is exciting. Thank you, everyone. It's just that, well, it's not like I don't have regrets, and I do have embarrassing things in my past that I can recall.

Right, at that time, back then...! Back when I was about twenty. Your humble storyteller blathered things that used to feel all pleasant-like such as, *"the world belongs to us youngsters! Youth is everything! Ain't got no meaning to life past thirty. Won't miss anythin' if they died!"* Awww, such embarrassing and foolish words. But why do I remember them so soon after New Year's? As this is a Year of the Snake, memories as tenacious as the snake itself are chasing after me, perhaps? Should I go off and die, now that I'm past my thirties? Sorry, but the instant I passed my thirties I changed my mind and no longer wanted to die. Die, I said. Was I stupid or what? Today I shall live on, as well. And I mean to cling on to life going forwards. Like one of those butt-ugly old and powerful people in anime and stuff. Where's the precious treasure that grants us eternal life? (at worst the T-Virus is also acceptable.)

And with this and that we got to the eighth volume of Jintai.

I love handing out merchandise, and, perhaps as the influence of the anime last year, I was able to give out tons of Jintai Goods, I'm so happy. Giving out tons of merchandise makes me go, *ahhh I (or rather someone somewhere) just did lots of hard work~*, I truly felt that. Goods are nice, yup, merchandise is nice. That moment is when I feel the fun of being in this trade. When I die I wanna be surrounded by my merchandise (not that I'm gonna die, though).

2 AD 2013.

By the way, there's this magazine called *Shonen Sunday S*.

It serializes the manga version of *Aura - Maruyuin Kouga's Final Fight*. This is an extremely well done mangafication, so I would be definitely be happy if you would check it out.

Tankoubons, right, the third should be on sale right around the time that this book is. From senpais past their forties to boys and girls with promising futures, be broad-minded as you take each other's hands and laugh with happiness. In particular I speak to those very rich senpais who use nothing but paper money and cards, thank you very much.

Now then, thanks to the serialization, every month I get sent in a *Sunday S* as sample, so while I turned into a really passionate reader, perhaps you all know about this. It's got a comic called *Umadonna* in it, you know? It does. The web browser game of *Umadonna* has become the talk of certain circles due to its ridiculous setting, anyone who spends the majority of their time online knows that. And the comic version of *Umadonna* is serialized surreptitiously in *Sunday S*. This comic version, everything else aside, tendentially deviates from the JRA (the Japanese Central Horse-racing Association)'s planning, which makes it fun, and as it went on, it got to the point it really made readers shiver in fear, acknowledge that the train was running outside its rails, and when it repeatedly showed invaders coming from another dimension, even your humble storyteller's very own 'little one' instinctively ascended (the highest of praises). All that despite how, when I first read it, I was worried for the pressure the JRA would exercise on the author. *Umadonna* is also releasing tankoubons, and I want to recommend them as strongly as I do *Aura*. Since I'm saying that, I'll add that, compared to how crazy and out-there the browser game of *Umadonna* was, the comic version could be called a sort of an alternate universe dark fantasy, so it can be enjoyed as its own separate thing. Read that at a good pace and cultivate a nature of abundance as a human being.

I'm genuinely sorry that I'm using this afterword as a blog.

Well then, see you next volume. I want to put it out without long waits, that I do.

This is an unofficial fan translation. Please support any official release.